“I think I’ve had ideas since before I was born” Working with Reception Children to Challenge ‘School Readiness’

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“I think I’ve had ideas since before I was born”

Working with Reception Children to Challenge ‘School Readiness’

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Northumbria University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been drawn to the way we work with young children in the early years, particularly given the pressures to 'ready' children for a more formal curriculum in Year 1. Many conceptualisations of 'school readiness' emphasise children's academic abilities, including the current Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2017), which describes the knowledge and skills considered important for children's future success. The aim of this research was to use Reception children's ideas to destabilise academic notions of 'readiness' and to capture moments of their everyday lives. The research, which brings together qualitative and post-qualitative approaches, was divided into two studies, in which I took different approaches to conceptualising children's voice. In an 'illuminative' first study, drawing and talk-based mosaic methods (Clark and Moss, 2011) were used to capture the ideas of 64 Reception children in 4 schools, as they prepared for their transition to Year 1. For example, in one key activity, children were asked to draw and talk about their 'perfect' classroom. The drawings revealed that objects and 'things' appear to be important in children. The classroom drawings also prompted reflection from Reception teachers about children's 'school readiness'. I then draw upon a second 6-week study in which an after-school 'Ideas Club' created a space offering open-ended play for three small groups (n=8-10) of Reception children. In the development of Study Two, 'plugging into' the field of post-structuralism (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013), and the work of Deleuze (and Guattari) in particular, was key to helping me consider how a slower, more indeterminate research space, and approach to 'school readiness', might

look. During the analysis process I worked with moments of 'wonder' (MacLure, 2013) from Study One and Study Two to consider how Reception children's ideas might make us think differently about 'readiness'. Ideas from the fields of New Materiality and post-humanism emerged unexpectedly during analysis as a way of further problematising these understandings. The 'findings' from this research and the playful, open methodology applied have implications for how we perceive Reception children's intelligence and abilities and the kinds of opportunities and experiences children need in the early years and beyond.

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PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THIS THESIS

Heads, L., & Jopling, M. (2019). Listening to young children in messy, playful research. Using Innovative Methods in Early Years Research: Beyond the Conventional, 77.

DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Ethics committee for each study.

Name: Laura Heads

Signature:

Date: 31st March 2020

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

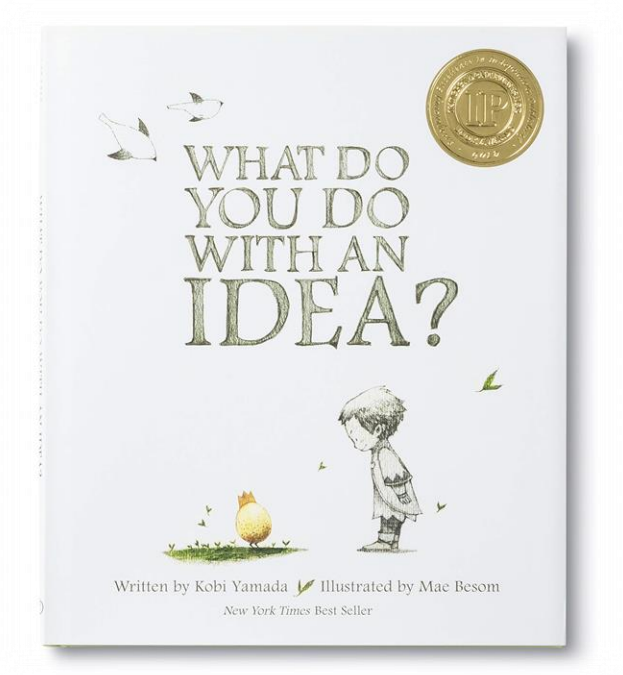
Part 1: What do you do with an Idea?

One day, I had an idea.

"Where did it come from? Why was it here?"

I wondered, "What do you do with an idea?"

Yamada (2013)



Some of the key themes in Yamada's (2013) picture book 'What do you do with an Idea?' have resonance with the ideas on the pages of this thesis. According to Yamada's (2013) book, ideas can often feel strange and wild and magical. They can leave you feeling nervous of others' opinions, especially when your ideas are different to theirs, so nervous in fact that you might be tempted to leave your ideas behind. Yet when you care for ideas, and give them your

attention, they can grow and can challenge you to work with new possibilities. I like the idea that this research project might be thought of as an exploration of ideas, of Reception children's ideas, teachers' ideas, my own ideas and the theories of other thinkers, all of which I have tried to use to think differently about the concept of 'school readiness'. They are ideas that, influenced by Deleuze's distinctive style of philosophising, are understood not as truth, but as a kind of knowledge that enables an 'unknown universe to appear' (Semestky, 2004, p. 455), ideas that also look like this:

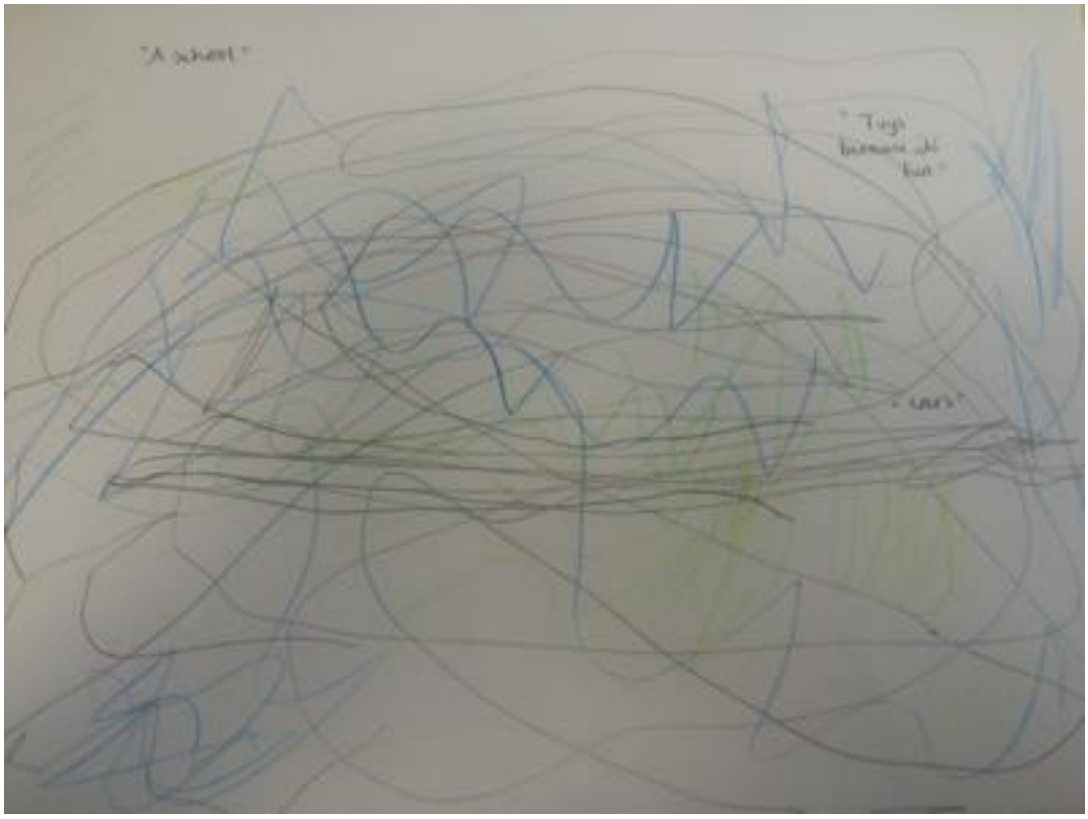


Image 1. A 'messy' classroom, drawn during Study One

The picture above is an idea that emerged during this project that captures what happened when I tried to research the concept of 'school readiness' with Reception children. This is because my experience of the process has been complex, confusing and messy, much like the concept itself. As such, I do not

attempt to offer an account of 'school readiness' that is simple and clear, or a set of methods that seek "more or less stable conclusions about the way things really are" (Law, 2004, p. 9). Instead, this research was shaped by the belief that the world is too elusive to understand fully and that social science inquiry might benefit from acknowledging such uncertainty (Law, 2004). In this way, a different understanding of rigour was adopted:

"Perhaps we will need to rethink our ideas about clarity and rigour, and find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight. Here knowing would become possible through techniques of deliberate imprecision." (Law, 2004, p. 3)

To ask what 'school readiness' consists of has also been explored in this thesis as an ontological matter – the matter of how one might live (May, 2005). With Deleuze's ontology there is no 'prescription for living', no attempt to reduce being to the knowable, there is only a willingness to experiment and to unsettle old ways of thinking (May, 2005). Deleuzian ontology (and his work with other philosophers) has therefore been invaluable for grappling with the complexities of 'school readiness' and for making connections between children's ideas, because when connections are made, spaces in-between can be unearthed:

"In a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but what there is 'between', the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other." (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, p. viii)

It is not only the ideas in this thesis that are important but the spaces 'in-between' that I have found, for they have helped me grapple with a concept that is controversial, complex and perhaps misunderstood (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994). Indeed, there appeared a need for research that interrogated current knowledge and identified gaps that exist within current conceptualisations of 'school readiness' (Crnic and Lamberty, 1994).

Becoming Playful and More Trusting

"…taking Deleuze 'seriously' does not prevent a writer from having a little fun." (Sellers and Gough, 2010, p. 604)

The style of this thesis is purposefully experimental to reflect the increasingly playful approach I took to researching with Reception children. I *think with* words and pictures and ideas, and I *think with* Deleuze, who understood writing as a monstrous event that can disrupt social or disciplinary expectations (Ulmer and Koro-Ljungberg, 2015). Indeed, the idea that we should *think with* writing rather than use it as a representational medium (Hanley, 2019) has been key to my approach:

"Writing generates, brings something to life, liberates, and traces dislocation and slippage." (Ulmer and Koro-Ljungberg, 2015, p.143)

My interweaving of the words and images of several picture books on the pages of this thesis can be taken as one form of experimentation. These picture books

are used as ‘provocations’ (Murris, 2016) to stimulate a more energetic and productive reading experience on account of their ability to “perform actions, produce effects and alter situations” (Bennett, 2004, p. 355). To think alongside picture books in this way is in keeping with Deleuze’s own approach to writing, given that he used a range of novels, poems and plays as reference points for philosophical discussion (Bogue, 2003). My engagement with picture books is not only a nod to my experiences teaching in early years settings, but is also a deliberate attempt to bring ‘non-human forces’ (the affects of things and matter) into play in the construction of new thinking:

“…our reality cannot be thought upon as socially constructed involving humans only, as is so often the case in educational research. Non-human forces are always involved in this construction.” (Hultman and Taguchi, 2010, p. 529)

It is useful to point out that there are some of the other ways this thesis might be seen to deviate from convention. As a start, this introduction is longer than would usually be expected and has an indeterminate quality in that it does not offer specific research questions and aims. This is to indicate my efforts to work *with* Reception children to challenge ‘school readiness’, and to be led by their ideas. The more conventional objectives and aims I started out with also became increasingly less relevant to my approach. In later chapters you might find that my literature review is very theoretical in parts, and that my findings focus less on ‘data’ (in a traditional way) than might be expected. Hopefully these differences will feel positive and productive for the reader as they follow this journey. Indeed, a full time PhD is a rare slower space that offered me the

time to develop alternative, more playful approaches to researching with children. I therefore felt I should play with the conventions of thesis writing to be true to my approach. At the same time, there had to be a compromise between the increasing openness of my approach and the need to fit it into something like a thesis format, a challenge which parallels with my efforts to fit messy and playful approaches with the temporal and formal restrictions of PhD research.

Within this thesis I hope the reader might also distinguish a story, a story of my journey from full time teacher to researcher that is important to the development of this research project. My decision to include this narrative might be seen as a form of reflexivity - a thoughtful attempt to engage in 'explicit self-aware meta-analysis' (Finlay, 2002). However, I would rather this narrative was used to examine the limits of 'school readiness', for my story indicates what can happen when we put our trust in young children's 'not yet thought' ideas:

"…to make connections one needs not knowledge, certainty, or even ontology, but rather a trust that something may come out, though one is not yet completely sure what. (Rajchman, 2000, p. 7)

To trust in this way has been described as a different kind of ethics (St. Pierre, 2013), the same kind of ethics that came to underpin this project, and my writing.

Thesis Structure

It might be helpful to the reader to understand that this thesis has a fairly traditional linear structure, despite its occasional experimental form. There are seven chapters and I introduce them here, in order to provide the reader with a guide to the unfolding of this project. However, the beginning-middle-end structure of this thesis does not necessarily reflect the way it was written: in a fairly random, fortuitous order, and without a focus on reaching a conclusion. This is why St Pierre's (1997: 403) experience of writing resonates with my own:

"Writing seems more accidental than intentional and is often produced by unintended juxtapositions: coreadings of texts on entirely different topics, the discovery of a particularly provocative word as I skim the dictionary page for another, or the memory of a dream that displaces some truth to which I have become too attached."

Chapter 1 is presented in a way that reflects a Deleuzian sensibility. Rather than be swamped with specificities, I want the reader to get a feel for my project, to hear my motivations, my inspirations, and my commitment to looking at educational practice in fresh ways. Chapter 2, 'Situating the Study' is divided into two parts, which in traditional terms can be thought of as a literature review (Part 1) and a theoretical framework (Part 2). The aim of Chapter 2 is not only to show command of the subject area and the contributions that have already been made to the field, but also to indicate the way theory has helped transform my thinking about 'school readiness'. Important to Chapter 2 is my discussion of the current position of 'school readiness' in policy in England, which can be

read in potted form in the introduction of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (DfE, 2017, p. 5):

"The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life."

This particular conceptualisation of 'school readiness', which emphasises Reception children's 'readiness' for a more formal education in Year 1, becomes the main focus for my review in this chapter. Moving onto Chapter 3 I demonstrate how 'plugging into theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013) impacted my practice in the field by describing how the methodology of Study One, informed a more playful second study. My approach to analysis, and particular ethical issues that arose in this project are also discussed. Chapters 4 and 5 offer an in-depth reading of several of the Receptions children's ideas, which emerged during Study One and Two. These ideas mainly comprise of classroom drawings (Chapter 4) and children's entanglements with clay (Chapter 5). Finally, Chapter 6 considers how the findings of this project have implications for classroom practice and future research.

Becoming Something Different

My previous experience as a Reception teacher is an important context for this research because it has been important to me to root this 'school readiness' inquiry within professional practice – a supposedly tangible and observable world that we can see, feel, act on, and act in (Gravett, 2012). However, it has also become my view that early years practice can only *become something different* when young children, and ways of working with them, are seen through a new lens. Here, my use of the phrase *become something different* is a deliberate hint at my attempt to use Deleuzian thinking to blur the theory/practice divide that is perceived to haunt current educational practice:

"…pedagogical practices are being increasingly mainstreamed and normalised in relation to universal standards. These tendencies reduce the complexities of teaching and learning in an increasingly complex and diverse world." (Taguchi, 2009, p.4)

With Deleuze, there is no being (May, 2005), only flows of experimentation and change (Evans, 2013). Grounding my research in this view has allowed me to trouble 'school readiness' in ways I did not foresee:

"…since we do not know of what a body is capable, it would be better to say, not that anything can happen, but that so much can happen that we do not know about. The world's possibilities are beyond us." (May, 2005, p.116)

Speaking of Deleuze's ontologies as May (2005) does resonates with the way Reception children's ideas have made it possible for me to consider a world

beyond ‘school readiness’, a world in which we do not claim to know what Reception children are capable of. The ideas of other theorists such as Barad (2007) have also allowed me to confront human-centered ways of thinking and to consider the implications of the view that “learning and knowing take place in the interconnections in-between different matter making themselves intelligible to each other” (Barad, 2007, p.140) for teaching and learning are a great deal more complex than the ‘school readiness’ agenda would have us believe. With Barad (2007) we understand that the perceived borders of an object *become* as a result of relations with other matter, such as the floor, light, a table and a pencil. In other words, *“*we are part of the material world that we continually endeavor to understand” (Areljung, 2019, p. 103 -104).

Two Studies, One Journey

Important to my research journey is the fact that data collection took the form of two distinct studies. In Study One I was informed primarily by fairly orthodox early childhood methodology literature, much of which advocates using child-friendly research methods. A recurring theme in these texts is the notion that children are not a single, homogenous group of people (Christensen and Prout, 2002) and that a multi-method, multi-sensory approach is useful for recognising children’s broad range of capacities (Crivello *et al*., 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; Lundy *et al.*, 2011; Clark, 2005). Given this understanding, Study One drew specific influence from Clark and Moss’ (2011) mosaic approach, a popular multi-method tool for investigating the lived experiences of young children in education. In one mosaic activity carried out during Study One, I asked Reception children to draw their ‘perfect’ classroom as a way of prompting

discussion about their school experiences. The children's imaginative and personal responses, many of which captured the 'everydayness' (Horton, 2008) of their lives, prompted me to consider how far 'school readiness' recognises young children's wide-ranging capabilities, and the complexity of their meaning-making both in the classroom and beyond. As part my Study One approach, children's classrooms were shared with eight Reception teachers as a means of encouraging a reflective dialogue about 'school readiness'. The children's ideas and drawings provoked teachers to speak candidly about the realities of children's transition out of the Early Years, and the differential balance of 'work' and play in Reception compared to Year 1. One child's drawing (Image 1) also provoked much reaction from the Reception teachers, many of whom interpreted the drawing as an indicator of the child's 'unreadiness' for school. The teachers' responses to the drawing prompted me to see the drawing and 'school readiness' in new ways. Most importantly, I realised that I wanted to use a second study to explore more openly how the ideas of Reception children, such as those associated with their everyday lives, could be used to complicate simplistic understandings of 'school readiness'.

It is worth emphasising already that the development of my first study occurred at a time when I was still trying to shore up my theoretical framework. Without a secure theoretical framework in place, Study One was guided by the methodologies of other researchers, and the rather naïve idea that Reception children would provide comprehensive answers to my questions about 'school readiness'. In contrast, I now appreciate that research is a messy process that produces many indeterminate versions of the 'truth', as perceived during Study One, when multiple, co-existing meanings associated with the concept of

‘school readiness’ were produced by the children. These experiences steered me in the direction of post-structuralist research and Deleuzian concepts to develop a methodology for a second study, which stressed a commitment to the indeterminate nature of knowledge and the truth. In this way, a recognition of the limits of Study One provided some of the inspiration I needed to take a different approach in my second study.

Study Two took the form of an after-school ‘Ideas Club’, a playful and emergent research space in which I spent time with small groups of Reception children from 3 schools over a four-week period. During the study I paid particular attention to the idea that the body, and its connections with the material world should be valued as a research tool (Woodyer, 2008; Clarke, 2011) and so I used picture books and play materials, such as clay, to engage children in open-ended exploration and conversation. While children participated in some pre-planned activities, I also endeavoured to imbue in my approach a certain degree of ‘slowness’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and flexibility, understanding that knowledge about ‘school readiness’ was not out there to be found but would likely be generated by the group in unexpected ways during our sessions. The after-school study was named ‘Ideas Club’ to complement my open-ended approach and to raise the status of children’s ideas. By focusing on Reception children’s ideas, I also wanted to engage with children in ways that resisted the measurement and comparison of children as subjects, (or objects) as is commonplace within educational policy and practice.

Part 2: What do you do with a problem?

My problem held an opportunity.

It was an opportunity for me to learn and to grow.

To be brave. To do something.

Yamada (2016)

"Problems are not in the mind, but rather belong to the world."

(Deleuze 1994 , p.280)

I opened this chapter with reference to Yamada's (2013) picture book 'What do you do with an Idea?' as a way into discussing the main aim of this project, which, put more explicitly, was to use Reception children's ideas to explore and disrupt narrow conceptualisations of 'school readiness'. To make known my own feelings about 'school readiness' I will now refer to Yamada's (2016) more recent text, 'What do you do with a Problem?" In this picture book Yamada (2016) encourages the reader to think about what they might do with a problem that refuses to go away. Would they worry about it? Ignore it? Or might they let

it shape them, change them and lead them to discover new things? For me, 'school readiness' is such a problem. It first started to follow me around in 2013 when I became a Reception teacher. It was there in the classroom, loitering in the pencil pots, and it got bigger as the academic year went on, pressuring me to equip the young, playful children in my class with formal skills ready for Year 1. But then I got the chance (through this project) to look more closely at the problem, to tackle it head on, and by doing this I found out that there was something 'beautiful inside' (Yamada, 2016). Importantly, drawing on the work of Deleuze (1994) has allowed me to develop similarly productive, yet more complex understandings of problems, as indicated by his suggestion that *"*problems are Ideas themselves*"* (p. 211):

"Rather than assuming that a problem makes sense by virtue to its solution, Deleuze thinks sense lies in the problem itself. A problem that makes sense does not consist in the search for a solution, and does not disappear once one has been found." (Snir, 2017, p. 7)

Thus, when we think of 'school readiness', we should not see it in only negative terms but in terms of its transcendent ontological status (Bryant, 2011) and its ability to generate "an open-ended process of learning" (Bowden, 2018, p. 60). In light of this view, we might also argue that early years policy-makers have misunderstood the internal character of a problem, for they have led us to think that children's 'unreadiness' for school has a common sense solution, a logic which could be summed up by Deleuze: "the master sets a problem, our task is to solve it, and the result is accredited true or false by a powerful authority"

(Deleuze, 2004, p.197). By contrast, ‘true’ problems do not have a ready-made answer. Instead they force us to think, to experiment and to evolve (Jeanes, 2016). And it is with this logic that I have endeavoured to research the problem of ‘school readiness’, a problem that was set in motion by my own sensibilities, the way in which I felt, experienced and sensed ‘school readiness’ in the classroom: “On the path which leads to that which is being thought, all begins with sensibility” (Deleuze, 1994, p.144).

To be clear, this project does not look for a 'recipe' for 'school readiness' success. It will not be concerned with ‘what works’, or what kind of early years education is effective in readying children for Year 1. This is because ‘school readiness’ is understood as being part of a powerful discourse that privileges goals and outcomes (Evans, 2013), and coerces early years teachers to calibrate children in terms of their approximation to the ‘normal’ child (MacLure, 2011). Instead, I wished for the project to open up spaces where alternative ways of thinking about children and education could be heard. I also hoped to raise questions about what we value in the early years, and as such, make a contribution to the discussion about what constitutes a 'good' education for young children. It is for this reason that the work of Biesta (2009, 2010, 2015) provides an important point of reference, for Biesta (2009, 2010, 2015) advocates that we should reconnect with the issue of purpose in education in ways which go beyond notions of ‘effectiveness’ which continue to dominate discussion.

Personal and Professional Influences

From the very beginning of my PhD journey, my intention was to work most closely with children. The reason for this outlook was initially rooted in the same drive that led me to teaching, because I enjoy spending time, and working with children. Since qualifying in 2008, I have been lucky enough to work with a great many wonderful individuals, firstly in Key Stage 2 (KS2) and then more recently as an early years teacher. Both of these periods have had an important influence on the teacher I have become, the values I have developed and the way in which this research has tried to capture and make heard Reception children's ideas.

In 2005 I began my teacher training at Sheffield Hallam University as part of a BA honours degree in Primary Education. Following three very challenging and successful years there, I was delighted to return to the North East of England as a newly qualified teacher to take up a Year 3 post at a school in my hometown. Undeniably, no amount of training could ever have prepared me for the realities of having my own class and the year passed in a blur of self-doubt, exhaustion, exhilaration and reward. Indeed, the job was extremely hard and the alarming stories I had heard about teacher workload were true, however it all felt worthwhile, for the rewarding relationships I developed with the children, for the many happy times we had together and for the sense of fulfilment I held at the end of year. As clichéd and predictable as it may sound, it felt good to be making a difference to the lives of others.

Despite spending a further four highly rewarding years in KS2 (with a change of schools in-between) I would not say the job got any easier. While I became increasingly efficient at some of the more administrative tasks, with experience came greater expectation and responsibility. As a highly reflective individual I also continuously scrutinised and challenged my practice, which in turn ensured my workload did not decrease. Lesson plans from previous years did not get opened and delivered as originally written. Instead, I looked for improvements and new ways of doing things, always with the enjoyment and development of the children in mind. While this kind of approach was not always easy, I strongly believe that in education we can never stand still, for there is no one best way of teaching every child, in every context.

Frustratingly, the nature of the statutory curriculum in Year 3 did not allow for much flexibility in the lesson content I could offer children; any attempts at 'creativity' could only be explored through the delivery of prescribed material, and through enrichment activities such as school trips and themed events. The endless drive to foster and demonstrate children's 'better than expected' progress also began to weigh heavy. Before one routine lesson observation I remember being informed by my line manager, *"Laura, I'll be looking for children making progress across every second of this lesson."* While some would have conceived this to be a desirable and conceivable achievement, I certainly thought otherwise. It was perhaps partly for this reason that I decided it was time to ask for a move to a different key stage in school, trusting that this would be beneficial for my continuing professional development. Interestingly, at the time an early years teacher who was fairly new to the school captured

my attention. When she spoke, she did so with great passion for her job and it was clear we shared similar values and appreciations of children. I therefore asked for a move to Reception so I could work directly with her and learn from her experience. Initially my request was not met with great enthusiasm by the school management team and I remember clearly the reason for their scepticism - that it would be a ‘waste’ of my skills and experience. Significantly however, raised expectations in the EYFS prompted a shift in their thinking. All of a sudden my KS2 experience became a potential asset in increasing the number of children leaving Reception with a judgment of ‘expected’ or ‘exceeding’ age-related expectations. For it was foreseen that with my background I would have high expectations of the children and might even make their education more formal - how salient a perspective given the nature of this research project. Sadly, I conceive that there was some truth in this assessment for I am certain that my KS2 experience did have a bearing on my initial approaches to teaching and ‘readying’ children for Year 1.

It is fair to say that my move to early years was momentous for a number of reasons but mainly because it changed the way I saw young children and my role as a teacher. Gone were the restricting expectations of the National Curriculum and hour-long lessons, and in its place was a seemingly more flexible, ‘child-centred’ approach. In those first months I felt energised and encouraged by this new way of working and I especially enjoyed assuming a less officious role in the learning process, spending time observing the children and studying the way they used the environment. The relationships I developed with the children felt all the richer as a result and I was astonished by the

abundance of knowledge and skill they revealed during their play. In fact, I found the children to be far more flexible and creative in their thinking than their older Year 3 peers.

As an early years teacher, I was required to implement the 2014 version of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, a revised version of the original 2008 guidance. At first glance, the principles underpinning this curriculum (Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments) appeared to align neatly with my own values, and given my inexperience, I also appreciated having a point for reference for planning and resourcing this new kind of classroom environment. However, it was not until a little later in the year that the outcomes defined in the EYFS (DfE, 2014) began to take on an unwelcome, imperious form, when I was asked to assess the young children in my class against the EYFS (DfE, 2014) 'Early Learning Goals'. The children quickly became numbers and questions about their readiness began to surface. What was perhaps most disheartening about this process was the negative label that became attached to one particular child in my class, a boy who brought so much energy, spark and ingenuity to classroom life but was found 'lacking' on account of his inability to write a simple sentence.

A second year teaching in Reception followed, a year that would be my last as a full time teacher. In March 2014, an advert for a 'school readiness' research project at Northumbria University presented an ideal opportunity to explore my conflicted feelings about the expectations imposed on me by the EYFS (DfE, 2017). To step away from the classroom as I did was extremely sad, but I also

experienced a great sense of unburdening knowing I was no longer complicit in a system that marginalises children at such a young age. It is important to mention that throughout the course of my doctorate I have continued to keep a foot in the classroom through supply teaching. Taking on this role as well as others, such as becoming a co-opted governor of a primary school, has undoubtedly influenced the decisions I have made during this project, as they have offered me different insights into children's school lives. Becoming Mum to Matilda through adoption in 2017 also feels significant to my story, not least because I came to know Matilda through my teaching. Indeed, the title of teacher rarely stretches to include the multiplicity and complexity of the role, the relationships that classrooms make possible, and the affectivity of the children with which we work:

"Perhaps the most enduring way in which Deleuze materializes his desire to present the child as generative force is through figuring the child as a vector of affect: an activator of change" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 273).

And it is as 'activators of change' that Reception children have challenged me, transformed me and inspired me to *become* researcher (and Mum too), such is their 'power-full' (Sellers, 2013) and affective presence.

A Brief Word on Ethics

The close of Chapter 1 feels like an opportune time to open up a discussion of ethics, for it is my understanding that ethical questions form a significant part of this thesis. Indeed, the ideas of Reception children have prompted me to

consider the ethics of 'school readiness' itself and the choices we make when we work with, and care for children. To have come to see ethics in this way, as key to our work with young children, aligns rather precisely with the views of Dahlberg and Moss (2004) who claim that early years settings are a *locus* of ethical practice. Dahlberg and Moss (2004) also emphasise their view that ethics should be openly and knowingly practiced:

"Rather than ethics being a matter of prescribing, transmitting and applying a code of rules, we are interested in ethical practices which foreground active personal responsibility for making ethical choices – but not as an autonomous subject seeking objective truth, rather as an ethical actor in relationship with others and located in a particular context." (p.12-13)

As such, my discussion of ethics within this thesis (Chapter 3) not only pertains to procedural aspects of the research process and 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), it also considers fundamental questions relating to how we might work *ethically* and *differently* with young children. Reflecting on my own attempts to develop more 'ethically responsive encounters' (McCormack 2006) with Reception children during Study Two therefore forms an important part of this discussion.

CHAPTER 2: SITUATING THE STUDY

Part 1

"Good morning, class. Today we are going to learn about Earthlets."

(Willis, 1988)

"Perhaps the biggest danger of all is when we forget that stories are just that – stories – and come to believe instead that they are some revelatory and fundamental truth." (Moss, 2018, p. 5)

What might it sound like to explain 'school readiness' to an alien, understood here as the 'readying' of young Reception children for Year 1? Within this chapter, I consider this question alongside my efforts to map out the historical rise of 'school readiness', a task that is by no means straightforward. The idea of describing 'school readiness' to an 'Other' was inspired by a favourite picture

book of mine ‘Dr Xargles Book of Earthlets’ (Willis, 1988). In this text, Willis (1988) presents our everyday world through the eyes of an alien. Dr Xargle, whom is giving a lesson about ‘Earthlets’ to his class of young aliens, explains:

“They have one head and only two eyes, two short tentacles with pheelers on the end and two long tentacles called Leggies.” (Willis, 1988)

Dr Xargle’s (Willis, 1988) use of retooled language to name familiar things encourages the reader to see the world from a new standpoint (Yannicopoulou, 2010). The scientific, indifferent way in which Dr Xargle presents ‘facts’ also has the effect of making our habits on Earth seem rather comical. So what if I wrote a Dr Xargle book about the concept of ‘school readiness’? Would ‘school readiness’ also appear comical? And what kind of retooled language might I need to use to trouble a concept that, despite its ambiguity, has become so familiar it is barely noticed (Peters *et al*., 2015)?

When they are four, Earthlets have go to a place called a school where a teacher looks after them. The teacher sometimes lets them run around or build things with other Earthlets. Teachers also train Earthlets to keep their bottoms still, to use their listening holes carefully, and to grip a pencil correctly with their tentacles.

An imagined piece of text from a Dr Xargle book

Indeed, it is because ‘school readiness’ has become such a taken-for-granted way of thinking that Willis’ (1988) attempts to make the familiar seem strange

appear particularly apt. Moss' (2018, p.5) discussion of 'dominant discourses' helps to explicate this point:

"'Dominant discourses' are stories that have a decisive influence on a particular subject, for example early years education, by insisting that they are the only way to think, talk and behave and that they are the only reality (…) fictional stories claim to be non-fictional statements, presenting themselves as natural, unquestionable and inevitable."

However, to present the story of 'school readiness' as Dr Xargle might would not fulfil the requirements of this chapter, which as a literature review should show command of the subject area and the contributions that have already been made to the field (Hart, 2018). And so it is my intention to be brave in providing a comprehensive account of the 'knowledge' that is already out there about 'school readiness', at the same time as acknowledging the limits of our knowing:

"The fact that we cannot secure a foundation for knowledge means that we are given the opportunity to invent, create and experiment. Deleuze asks us to grasp this opportunity, to accept the challenge to transform life." (Colebrook, 2002, p. 2)

This passage has guided my account of school readiness, which is based in a post-structuralist worldview, a way of thinking that affords opportunities to

disrupt ‘regimes of truth’ that serve to maintain dominant discourses such as ‘school readiness’:

“Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (Foucault 1980, p. 131)

So Dr Xargle, where do I start?

“…few topics in the early years community have such currency and so many audiences as the topic of readiness for school.” (Graue, 1993, p.1)

Despite its long history, reflecting and influencing national and international political agendas, the concept of ‘school readiness’ remains ambiguous and complex (Tickell, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). Policy-makers debate legislative action relating to ‘readiness’, teachers talk about ‘readiness’ when they assess children, and parents anguish over ‘readiness’ when they make decisions about their child’s early education (Graue, 1993). Crucially, these various stakeholders are also likely to share different views about what ‘readiness’ means (Graue, 1993). At an abstract level, 'school readiness' is generally agreed to be preparation in children’s early years for success at school, however debate continues over the crucial components of child development

that affect this success (Snow, 2006) and the relative responsibility of schools, families and communities. At a macro level, there are references to 'readiness' throughout the most recently revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework (DfE, 2017). Newspaper headlines in 2014, which suggested, "Half of children are not ready to start school" (Telegraph, 2014) also placed 'readiness' in the public eye and further highlighted its position in policy. There is widespread unease that pressures to 'ready' children with a prescribed set of knowledge and skills are having a negative impact on early years practice and children's wellbeing (BERA and TACTYC, 2014; PACEY, 2013; Whitebread and Bingham, 2011). There are also concerns that definitions of readiness give little weight to the varied and cultural aspects of childhood (Peters *et al*., 2015). With these issues in mind, it is not surprising that the topic of 'school readiness' continues to stimulate intense conversation and investigation within the early years research community (Peters *et al*., 2015).

The Rise of Readiness

As a matter of policy, it could be argued that 'school readiness' first appeared as a term in America in the 1960s during the implementation of a preschool program called Head Start (Tager, 2017). According to Tager (2017) the founders of Head Start utilised the term in order to justify the need for the programme in poor urban areas. Interestingly, two of the programme's founders Zigler and Styfco (2010) have suggested that efforts to help poor children in their early learning can be traced as far back as the 1700s. As such, it was not a huge leap for the planners of Head Start to think that nursery school

experience could help children from poorer families be better prepared for school (Zigler and Styfco, 2010). When Head Start launched in 1965, 'school readiness' was not an official goal of the programme. It was only in 1998 that specific goals relating to 'school readiness' were put in place. By this time the term was already in the public domain as a result of the Educate America Act (Zigler and Styfco, 2010).

Indeed, many writers (e.g. Graue, 1993, Dockett and Perry, 2002) have pinpointed the inception of 'readiness' to a later point in history, to 1989 when President George H. Bush and the US Congress signed into law 'The Goals 2000: Educate America Act', which stated as Goal number 1 that *"All children in America will start school ready to learn"* (Snow, 2006). Consequently, during the following decade, the concept of 'readiness' became an important US policy mandate and a common rhetoric for describing children's needs (Kagan, 1992). The 'readiness' goal also placed early childhood education firmly on the national agenda and made clear a view that *all* young children should have access to 'high quality' preschool programmes (National Education Goals Panel, 1990). In spirit, making sure children start school 'ready to learn' could be considered a praiseworthy goal (Lewitt and Baker, 1995), particularly given the 'commendable focus' it placed on early childhood education (Dockett and Perry, 1999) and on children's welfare and wellbeing. Perhaps for this reason, the National Education Goals Panel reported strong public backing for the proposed educational reforms, making specific reference to the support of parents and teachers who had long shown concern for children's preparedness for school (Kagan, 1990). At the time, several national US organisations added

their plaudits for the policy. For example, the President of the 'Carnegie Trust for the Advancement of Teaching', Ernest Boyer, spoke publicly of the goal as a pledge of 'care and compassion' (1995). Likewise, Novello *et al*, (1992), welcomed the idea that health and education were being considered 'critical partners' in striving for improvement, as exemplified in the second of the goal's objectives.

While the aim of the 'ready to learn' goal was initially met with a good deal of support, a range of conceptual and practical ambiguities also emerged as a focus for concern (Kagan, 1992), as exemplified in the following policy brief:

"Even though the goal of having children start school ready to learn is praiseworthy, as a guide to policy implementation, this statement is proving problematic (…) Even the basic assumptions of the goal statement have been contested: is it the children who should be ready for school or the schools that should be ready for the children, or the society that should provide appropriate support for the children and the schools? (Lewit & Baker, 1995, p. 128)

Such ambiguities yielded the release of a number of additional government publications throughout the 1990s, aimed at delineating the concept more clearly. Such literature affirmed the 'readiness' goal as a shared responsibility between families and society (NEGP, 1994) and laid out the essential attributes of a 'ready school' (NEGP, 1998). At this time, discussions of 'readiness' also became more commonly tethered to children's ability to perform in the classroom, obscuring the meaning of the original 'ready to learn' phrase. This

inconsistency is evident in a set of national 'guideposts', released by the US Department of Education in 1991, which described the 'readiness' goal in terms of children's school success, whilst also supporting a view that *all* children are ready to learn (Saluja and Scott-Little, 2000) – "young children are eager to learn, yet not all children succeed in school" (p. 6). Thus, the term 'school readiness' materialised as a more common interpretation of the goal and the concept now stands as a lasting legacy of the 'Educate America' act, as indicated by its firm position in contemporary education policy around the world.

To provide further context to the work of the National Education Goals Panel and the interest that followed, it is perhaps useful to look at the landmark report 'Nation At Risk', which was published in 1983 by the US Department for Education. Within this report, the country's 'mediocre' education system was held up as a significant threat to the US' position in the global market and to the future prosperity of the nation. The report expressed commitment to developing better systems of 'coherent learning' and to forming a new kind of 'Learning Society' to deal with an ever-changing world of competition. Fittingly, this report signifies the strong links that governments, both past and present, have made between education and the global market and a view of education as a highly valuable resource (Oberhuemer, 2005). Against this backdrop, the rise in global interest in 'school readiness' is therefore not surprising, as for years national and international governments have bolstered various policy initiatives aimed at raising educational standards and contesting their country's position in an increasingly competitive global economy (Deakin-Crick, 2005; Lauder *et al*., 2006). In this vein, policymakers have presented the 'school readiness' concept

as a viable strategy for improving academic achievement and human capital, in response to the global economic agenda (Oberhuemer, 2005; UNICEF, 2012; Mashburn and Pianta, 2006). Issues of equity and a desire to promote the lifelong learning potential of *all* young children have also informed support for the concept (Neaum, 2016; UNICEF, 2012).

School Readiness – A means to a fairer world?

"At the beginning of the school year you administer an assessment to determine the basic skills of your incoming class. As you show these young children a book you ask, 'Show me where you would start to read.' Almost two-thirds of these young children do not know. Some might suggest that these children lack intelligence (…) However, these children not only live in economic poverty but also live in environments deprived in ways beyond the lack of economic resources." (Wright *et al*, 2000, p. 99)

We live in a world where access to early education remains inconsistent and where children's earliest life experiences are highly variable. What Wright *et al*. (2000) capture above is the fact that many children in 'at-risk populations' lack the critical early childhood experiences which allow them to be successful in school. When notions of equity and vulnerability are invoked in this way, the subject of 'school readiness' quickly becomes emotive, and there would be few who would disagree with the statement that *all* children deserve the 'best possible start' in life (UNICEF, 2012). In 2012, the children's charity UNICEF offered a positive appraisal of 'school readiness', describing its 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' benefits to children, families and schools, as well as to broader

goals of social equity and economic development. In this sense, 'school readiness' is seen by UNICEF (2012) to support the work of countries striving for a society in which all children are afforded access to a basic education. UNICEF (2012) also argued that access to pre-primary education, and their 'school readiness' interventions have had a profound effect on vulnerable children, including girls (UNICEF, 2012). Similarly, Save the Children (2014) described their 'school readiness' programmes as having successfully engaged vulnerable children across the world, including through their 'Early Steps' programme, which helped provide parents with the information they needed to support responsive and positive parent-child interactions.

Reading about the work UNICEF (2012) and Save the Children (2014) do might lead us to suppose that the political interest in 'school readiness' has had many positive outcomes for children across the globe. Findings from several other studies support this supposition. For example, the outcomes of New *et al*. (2015) suggest that 'school readiness' programmes have helped support Australian refugee families, as indicated by their work with 11 African refugee mothers all of whom attended a supported playgroup. In a different study, Lynch *et al*. (2017) reported that the 'Kids in Transition to School' randomised control trial intervention of 192 children provided significant emotional benefits and improvements in 'school readiness' for young children in foster care. As a final example, Cannon *et al*. (2012) focused on the potential of a centre-based pre-school programme for improving the outcomes of children of immigrant parents who do not speak English well. Cannon *et al*.'s (2012) report indicated that children who were enrolled in such programmes had significantly improved

reading skills. Overall, these studies could be seen to form a part of the scientific evidence base that Winter and Kelley (2008) describe as proof that high-quality 'school readiness' programs yield positive outcomes for children.

Thinking about the consequences for children not ready for school is another emotive topic that is likely to garner support for 'school readiness'. Macdonald and McCarten (2014) raise this matter in their systematic review, pointing out that school can impact positively on a child's self-esteem and attitude. With respect to adulthood, similar research has demonstrated that children who enter school 'ready to learn', (defined as scoring highly on tests of cognitive skills) are more likely to develop successful careers as adults (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan 2005). By contrast, low educational attainment can translate into adverse outcomes in adulthood including unemployment, depression and crime (Karoly *et al*., 2005, Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan 2005). If readiness-driven interventions can avert some of these detrimental consequences, then it is not surprising that they are deemed valuable. When we also consider PACEY's (www.pacey.org.uk) view that 'school readiness' means having strong social skills, an ability to cope emotionally and a desire to learn, we might be prompted, like many researchers, to investigate how we go about fostering these attributes in *all* children, so that no child 'is left behind'. As the UK's Department for International Development (2019) writes:

"We believe that no one should face the indignity of extreme, absolute, chronic poverty, no one should be denied the opportunity to realise their full potential

or to share in progress, no-one should be unfairly burdened by disaster or a changing climate, and no-one should have their interests systematically overlooked. We believe it is in all of our interest to leave no one behind and to ensure a fair opportunity for all, now and for the future."

The links Tickell (2011) makes between 'school readiness' and 'happy enquiring childhoods' in her review of the EYFS, make for further powerful and persuasive reading. Interestingly, Tickell (2011) also uses the term 'school unreadiness' as a way to remedy the 'emotive' and 'ambiguous' nature of 'readiness':

"The evidence is clear that children who are behind in their development at age 5 are much more likely than their peers to be behind still at age 7, and this can lead to sustained but avoidable underachievement. My recommendations tackle this as a matter of utmost importance." (p. 19)

School Readiness in England

In the next section I describe the rise of 'school readiness' in England. I indicate why both the Reception Year and Year 1 are pertinent to this project. I also discuss four very recently published papers (Kay, 2018; Bates, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2019; Wood, 2019), all of which indicate why the concept of 'school readiness' remains a pertinent area of research.

Focus on 'school readiness' has been particularly intense in some countries, including in England, where recent governments have prioritised improvement

in the early years. In 2006 the introduction of the EYFS by the Labour government marked a significant moment in this endeavour. The framework built on previous non-statutory guidance (Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning, 1996, Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, 2000*)* and reflected a historical rise in greater specification for early years and primary curricula (Robert-Holmes, 2012). It was foreseen that the implementation of a statutory framework would ensure quality and consistency across all types of pre-school setting (Tickell, 2011; Boyd and Hirst, 2015) and a method by which all children could achieve the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes (HM Treasury, 2003). Interestingly, the 2008 EYFS framework made no specific reference to 'school readiness'. However, in 2010 the new Coalition Government conducted a review of the original framework, and clear references to 'readiness' appeared in the revised EYFS framework of 2014 (DfE, 2014). These changes were perceived by some to be a signal that practitioners ought to be planning a more 'academically grounded' curriculum (Boyd and Hirst, 2015), as further implied by the framework's revised higher levels of attainment in literacy and mathematics (BERA and TACTYC, 2014). Consequently, this focus on academic achievement raised concerns about the 'schoolification' of the early years and the risk of damage to high quality play (PACEY, 2013). While some consider the introduction of the original EYFS framework (DfE, 2008) to have been an innovation in transforming childhood education (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*., 2008), others are less comfortable about the way in which young children, each bestowed with unique depository of experience, knowledge and skills, continue to be measured against a 'one-size-fits-all standard of readiness' for school (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011). Far from disappearing, the most

recent iteration of the EYFS framework (DfE, 2017) confirmed that 'school readiness' remains high on political agenda in England.

The Significance of the Reception Year to School Readiness

"The term 'Reception' refers to leaders and staff 'receiving' children into their school. While many children will have already had some form of pre-school provision, the Reception Year is often their first experience of full-time education." (Ofsted, 2017, p. 8)

Throughout this thesis, the children who took part in Study One and Study Two are commonly referred to as Reception children. In England, 'Reception' is understood as the final year of the Foundation Stage, a distinctive phase of education and care for children from birth to five. The relevance of the Reception year to the 'school readiness' debate is emphasised by Ofsted (2017) in their 'Bold Beginnings' report, which states that the year should help prepare children for "the rest of their education and beyond." (p. 2) Ofsted's (2017) report also indicates that the Reception year occupies unique educational terrain as both a beginning and an end:

"For parents, it is the end of early education and care, at home and/or across multiple settings, and the start of school. For school leaders and teachers, it is the crucial bridge between the EYFS and, for most schools, the start of the national curriculum." (Ofsted, 2017, p. 8)

Its function as both a beginning and an end is further complicated by a discrepancy in views about when a child's education begins. As Ofsted (2017) acknowledges, while Year 1 may be the 'official start' of school, the Reception year is more commonly recognised by many early years stakeholders, including parents, as the beginning of a child's formal education.

Interestingly, there was a time when the Reception year had very little status. This is because it had no place in the National Curriculum (the first of which was introduced in 1988) and no legislated curriculum of its own (Keating *et al*, 2000; Wood, 1999). Without legislation, Reception was often seen as the first class of primary school (Fisher, 2010) and many teachers followed a similar approach to Key Stage 1, where the introduction of the 'literacy hour' and daily mathematics lesson (DfEE, 1998) had been a focus (Aubrey 2004; McInnes, 2002). This construed the Reception year as an ambiguous phase of education (ATL, 2004) and many professionals questioned the appropriateness of this practice for 4-year-old children (Wood, 1999). Then, in September 2000, the introduction of the 'Foundation Stage' brought with it a new way to describe the education of children aged three to five, and a new curriculum framework (QCA, 2000), which endorsed a more informal, play-based approach to working with young children (Rogers and Evans, 2007; White and Sharp 2007). With the new framework came sequential learning outcomes, and support in planning appropriate learning experiences for young children (Aubrey, 2004). The expectation that young children should meet specific age- and stage-related goals remains a salient feature of current early years legislation, indicating that policy makers still view learning as straightforward and sequential in nature.

Many teachers and early years stakeholders were reported to have welcomed the changes brought about by the introduction of the Foundation Stage. In a survey commissioned by the DfES, the majority of both head teachers (91%) and Reception class teachers (95%) viewed the Foundation Stage as a 'good thing' (Aubrey, 2004). The benefits they described included: more flexibility in teaching, greater emphasis on practical play and outdoor activity, and an improved sense of purpose for the Reception year (Aubrey, 2004). The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL, 2004) reported similar, positive findings relating to practitioners' belief in the ability of the Foundation Stage to improve standards. However, the findings of the study also prompted ATL (2004, p. 6) to raise concerns about the position of the Reception year in the Foundation Stage, which are arguably still relevant today:

"There was evidence that the function of the reception year was seen exclusively in terms of the whole school context and the start of statutory education; there was a relatively low level awareness of the relationship of the reception year to the education of all Foundation Stage children, with the structures of Early Years Development…"

Indeed, more recent surveys would indicate that the Reception year remains an ill-defined phase of early education (Teaching Schools Council, 2016; Early Excellence, 2017). The way Ofsted (2017) refer to the Reception year as a 'false start' would also imply that the function of the Reception year is still seen in terms of its relationship to the whole school context. This leaves its relationship to the Foundation Stage largely ignored.

ATL (2014) indicated that the ambiguity surrounding the Reception year is largely due to the way it occupies a midway position between different structures and approaches. Indeed, the balance between 'child-led learning' and 'adult-led learning', and 'formal learning' and 'play-based learning' has been a common feature of discussions relating to the early years in England for some time and is pertinent to many of the reported tensions that continue to exist in relation to Reception practice. The recent 'Hundred Review' (Early Excellence, 2017) for example, surveying and interviewing over 4000 school leaders and Reception teachers, acknowledged the 'unique' and 'highly specialist' nature of the Reception year. The findings of the review indicated positive, widespread support for retaining the EYFS on account of its ability to 'effectively support teaching and learning in Reception' (Early Excellence, 2017). However, some Reception teachers also expressed their concern that raised expectations in the Literacy and Mathematics were leading to an 'over-focusing on formal skills', at the expense of other areas of learning and development. The contested concepts of 'school readiness' and 'schoolification' were also reported as responsible for some of the pressures experienced by Reception teachers (Early Excellence, 2017). At its end, the Early Excellence report (2017) called for greater clarification of the overall purpose of the Reception year.

Despite very positive support for the introduction of the Foundation Stage year in Reception (Quick *et al*., 2002; McInnes, 2002) and for retaining an EYFS (Early Excellence, 2017), questions of appropriateness and purpose, relating

to the Reception curriculum, continue to persist. In 2007, Rogers and Evans put forward a case for rethinking and repositioning Reception within the early years to counter a view of Reception as a 'preparatory stage to formal primary schooling'. This particular dialogue highlights the relevance of the Reception year to the 'school readiness' debate and also links well to discussions about Year 1, school transition, and the starting age of 'more formal learning' in England and around the world. In 2010 the Cambridge Review of Primary Education, an independent enquiry led by Robin Alexander, recommended extending the Foundation Stage to age six to fall in line with international practice. This, Alexander (2010) argued, would give children more time to build confidence and establish positive attitudes to learning. At the same time, the review conceded that raising the school starting age was perhaps an unnecessary change because the main issue is not *when* children start school but what they do when they get there (Alexander, 2010).

"With sufficient resources, there is no reason why good quality play-based learning up to age six cannot be provided in primary schools." (Alexander, 2010, p. 17)

This recommendation hints at the pedagogical discontinuity that exists in the transition from Reception to Year 1, an incoherence that teachers have attributed to the constraints of the National Curriculum (Nicolson, 2019). In line with Alexander's (2010) recommendations, the teachers in Nicolson's (2019) study were adamant that the pedagogical approach implemented in the EYFS should be extended to the whole of Key Stage One.

Year 1 and the National Curriculum

"A national curriculum sets out the body of knowledge, skills and understanding that a society wishes to pass on to its children and young people." (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009, p. 9)

In 1988 the Education Reform Act heralded the first statutory National Curriculum in England and marked the culmination of a number of developments already appearing in the education system (Ball and Bowe, 1992; Wyse and Torrance, 2009). These developments were linked to the perceived need to make educational provision more consistent (Oates, 2011), a desire to raise standards (Tymms and Merrell, 2007) and the economic recession of the 1980s, which saw education become more integral to improving the country's economic prospects (Fisher, 2000). Also pertinent to these developments was the increasing support for discourses associated with neoliberalism:

"The emergence of neoliberal states has been characterised by the transformation of the administrative state, one previously responsible for human well-being, as well as for the economy, into a state that gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives (…) The context of education is clearly a highly relevant site for such structuring to take place." (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248)

An important element of the National Curriculum was the composition of ‘core’ and ‘foundation’ subjects, with fixed ‘programmes of study’ (knowledge, skills and understanding) and ‘attainment targets’ for each subject (Ball and Bowe, 1992). The term ‘key stage’ was also introduced, alongside common labelling to describe the years of education from Years 1 to 11; this was to support the implementation of the new assessment system, which included the testing of 7 year-olds at the end of Key Stage One (Whetton, 2009). In positive terms, the prescribed structure of the National Curriculum sought to end a common problem, whereby children were often taught the same topic several times (Oates, 2011). However, the introduction of the National Curriculum was also seen by some as an example of increasing state control of education (Ball and Bowe, 1992).

Over the years, a review and reform process of the National Curriculum has remained in short cycle and there have been many adjustments, relating to core content and assessment procedures (Oates, 2011). The first review came in 1993, as a response to teachers’ complaints about ‘unwieldy’ testing arrangements (House of Commons, 2009), while the most recent National Curriculum (2014) included increased levels of attainment in literacy and mathematics, and a more ‘knowledge-rich’ content (DfE, 2014). Prime Minister David Cameron described the new 2014 curriculum as ‘a revolution in education’ (Independent, 2013) and the national press described it as ‘tough and rigorous’ (BBC, 2014; The Guardian, 2013). These changes also provoked ongoing conflicts about the relative virtues of knowledge- and skills-based approaches and the merits of introducing ‘harder’ material at an earlier age.

Year 1 continues to mark the beginning of the statutory National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) and a more prescribed approach to teaching and learning (White and Sharp, 2007). In this position, Year 1 has been subject to many of the same National Curriculum initiatives that have been applied to the whole primary phase (Fisher, 2010). An example of this was the introduction of two curriculum interventions: The National Literacy Strategy (DfEE 1998) and Numeracy Strategy (DfEE 1999), which were designed to encourage emphasis on the teaching of basic skills as a means of improving standards (Wyse and Torrance, 2009). These strategies outlined a delivery model of a 'literacy hour' and a daily mathematics lesson and changed the focus of the curriculum from the 'what' to the 'how' (Brown *et al*., 2010). With respect to the literacy hour, some teachers were very positive about aspects of the initiative, such as the increased levels of funding and in-service training (Fisher and Lewis, 1999). The structure of the literacy hour lesson was also seen as a way of maximising 'effective learning time' and encouraging an appropriate balance of teaching methods (Beard, 1999). However, the universal application of the strategies across the primary age range was called into question (Fisher 2010). Writing more generally about this topic, Fisher (2010) proposed that government ministers had not given Year 1 children's needs sufficient consideration in the introduction of various National Curriculum initiatives, such as the literacy and numeracy strategies.

While the literacy and numeracy strategies are no longer used in their original form, the current National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) continues to promote the regular teaching of literacy and mathematics in primary classrooms, including

in Year 1. In 2012, a Year 1 phonics screening check was also introduced, the outcomes of which are reported to local authorities and parents (Gibson and England 2016; Duff *et al*., 2015). The DfE (2010, p.1) described the phonics test as a "short, light-touch screening check designed to confirm that children have grasped the basics of phonic decoding and to identify those pupils who need extra help at an early stage". It has also been attested as a "valid measure of phonics skills" (Duff *et al*., 2015), although many educators have doubted its necessity and its effectiveness as a method (National Union of Teachers, 2012; UKLA, 2012). Additionally, a three-year evaluation of the phonics check (commissioned by the DfE) gave an indication of its impact in schools and included examples of settings that had increased the pace of phonics teaching, both in Year 1 and Reception (Walker *et al*., 2015):

"I think it's made us teach phonics faster as you need to get the pupils to a certain level before Year 1."

Reception teacher, cited in Walker *et al*. (2015)

The idea that teachers are having to work 'faster' to meet certain standards is at odds with Bates' (2009) endorsement of 'pedagogical slow time'. These findings also support a wider view that early years pedagogy is being drawn into wider school efforts to raise standards (Robert-Holmes, 2015), as in the case of improving children's attainment in reading. At present the phonics check remains a statutory requirement for all eligible Year 1 pupils and reflects

the ongoing emphasis in England on using a systematic synthetic phonics approach to teaching early reading (Darnell *et al*., 2017).

School Readiness – a bold beginning?

A literature search using the term 'school readiness' yields telling results. Top entries from a recent search (December 2019) included: a research project that examined links between 'school readiness' and later achievement (Duncan *et al*., 2007); efforts to offer new perspectives on the relationship between children's social relationships and 'school readiness' (Mashburn and Pianta, 2006); and a study exploring the effects of a 'school readiness' intervention on the brain functioning of children in foster care (Graham *et al*., 2018). The results of the search (over 1,600,000 entries) spanned a great many research fields, and words such as 'intervention', 'predictors' and 'skills' were common features of publication titles and abstracts. The results made me wonder how efforts to foster and measure 'readiness' have not yet been exhausted. What also struck me about many of these studies was the willingness of researchers to reproduce 'school readiness' discourses by defining the concept in their own precise terms, for example :

"The model of school readiness presented in this article broadly defines school readiness as a function of an organized system of interactions and transactions among people (children, teachers, parents, and other caregivers), settings (home, school, and child care), and institutions (communities, neighborhoods, and governments)." (Mashburn and Pianta, 2006, p. 151)

Writing in this assured and precise way means such research is likely to be used by policy-makers who are interested in improving children's readiness for school. By contrast, many authors and researchers (e.g. Bates 2019) have raised critical questions about 'school readiness' in England and its impact on children's education.

I continue this account of 'school readiness' by discussing four very recently published papers (Kay, 2018; Bates, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2019; Wood, 2019), all of which indicate why the concept of 'school readiness' remains a pertinent area of research. The attempt that is made in each of these papers to make 'values visible' (Moss, 2018) also has resonance with my own approach to researching 'school readiness'. Firstly, Kay's (2018) rhetorical analysis of Ofsted's 'Bold Beginnings' report (2017) is useful for thinking about the current position of 'school readiness' in policy in England and the significance of the Reception year to the 'school readiness' debate, as emphasised by the opening gambit of the report:

"This report shines a spotlight on the Reception Year and the extent to which a school's curriculum for four- and five-year-olds prepares them for the rest of their education and beyond." (Ofsted, 2017, p. 2)

With these introductory lines in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that Kay (2018) condemns the report for furthering England's 'school readiness' agenda and for trying to persuade the reader that the Reception year is an important site for improving children's 'life chances' (Ofsted, 2017). Indeed, the language used

in the report, as analysed by Kay (2018), has the effect of making 'school readiness' a sensitive subject:

"The language used to frame these issues is particularly emotive as the report describes how Reception is a 'missed opportunity' that can leave many children exposed to the 'painful consequences' of falling behind their peers." (Kay, 2018, p. 329)

The report's endorsement of direct, whole class teaching methods for improving children's outcomes in literacy and mathematics also indicates that academic skills are considered key to preparing children for the rigor of Year 1 (Kay, 2018). The extent to which this report has had an impact on early years practice and children's access to play remains to be seen and Kay (2018) advocates further research in this area.

Ofsted's (2017) 'Bold Beginnings' report offers a pertinent introduction to another recently published article in which Bates (2019) critiques UK policy-makers for turning time into a pedagogical resource. Indeed, Ofsted's (2017) assertion that the Reception year is a 'missed opportunity' for many children, appears inadvertently to legitmise Bates' (2019) argument that 'readiness for school' is too heavily focused on the idea that there is 'no time to waste':

"Much of current policymaking takes the meaning of time for granted within a 'quantitative' view of time as a neutral, standardised parameter." (p. 411)

The ‘Bold Beginnings’ report (Ofsted, 2017) also connects a child’s early education with their later achievement by making reference to a research finding published by the Department of Education in 2014: “Done well, it (early education) can mean the difference between gaining seven Bs at GCSE compared with seven Cs” (Ofsted, 2007, p.8). Such claims further bolster Bates’ (2019) argument that policymakers see time, and children’s futures, as predictable and predetermined entities. If a similar view is absorbed uncritically by early years teachers, it could be that they are more likely to think about efficiency and outcomes, rather than how children are experiencing the classroom in the ‘here and now’ (Bates, 2019). To promote this latter way of thinking, Bates (2019) suggests that we need to develop more nuanced, complex understandings of time, that allow us to dwell longer in the present:

“Childhood is indeed short in the timescale of human life but ‘taking time seriously’ entails that we dwell longer in the present, as if there were time to waste, for it is in the present that educational practice can be merely replicated or approached anew and changed.” (p. 424)

In the classroom, a more complex understanding of time might even prompt teachers to include ‘pedagogic slow time’ as part of the school day, a time in which there are no objectives or goals, enabling children to experience the classroom in ways that transcend the ticking clock (Bates, 2019). The idea of ‘pedagogic slow time’ links well to my own methodological approach in Study Two (Chapter 3).

Both Kay (2018) and Bates (2019) are direct in drawing our attention to the persuasive 'school readiness' discourses that are circulating in early years settings. The views offered by Roberts-Holmes (2019) in his discussion of 'school readiness' and governance are of a similar vein. He begins by suggesting that 'school readiness' performance measures, within the English context, are being used to govern early years education and to steer pedagogy in the direction of more formal schooling. The data presented by Roberts-Holmes (2019) also supports a view that primary school pedagogy is 'cascading down' into the early years, with many Nursery and Reception teachers using 'ability grouping' practices to better their chances of meeting 'school readiness' attainment targets.

"Ability grouping as a primary school pedagogy has cascaded down into the earlier phase of education, so that young children are increasingly labelled, classified and distributed according to their so-called different 'abilities'…" (Roberts-Holmes, 2019, p. 8)

What makes Roberts-Holmes' (2019) research particularly interesting is his view that the Year 1 Phonics Screening check, (introduced in June 2011) has prompted these changes in practice. For Roberts-Holmes' (2019) the Year 1 Phonics Screening check can therefore be thought of as a new 'school readiness' measure.

For my final example of recent 'school readiness' research, I turn to the work of Wood (2019), for her discussion offers an interesting lens on the literature

discussed so far. Wood (2019) uses the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to draw attention to the policy discourses at work in early childhood education in England:

"A kaleidoscope is a tube that encloses fragments of glass or other materials, and small mirrors, and directs one's eye, or gaze to what the kaleidoscope produces with its consituent parts." (p. 784)

But how does this relate to 'school readiness'? To clarfiy, Wood (2019) describes early years education as consisting of many kaleidoscopes of discourse, each of which mirrors, reflects, and refracts the same powerful (and narrow) messages to children, families and teachers. The Ofsted kaleidoscope for example uses different mechanisms (inspections, reports and surveys) to reinforce the same messages, such as by providing guidance on 'good' and 'effective' practice (Wood, 2019). Policy discourses, such as 'school readiness', which use logical and solution–focused language, further underline the kinds of goals and outcomes that are expected and valued by the DfE in England (Wood, 2019). Thus, to think about 'school readiness' in Wood's (2019) terms is to understand the concept as one of many policy discourses that work together to accelerate ideologies with the aim of producing good learners and effective teachers. This powerful coming together of policy discourses also has the effect of suppressing alternative views of teachers' pedagogical roles and professional responsibilities, which are according to Wood (2019, p. 794) "inherently social, relational, equitable, and democratic".

Where are the children?

Finding children's perspectives in the 'readiness' debate proved to be a difficult endeavour during my early exploration of literature on the topic. As O'Farrelly *et al*. (2019) point out, 'school readiness' research has tended to privilage adults' observations over children's priorities and experiences, despite the fact that increasing attention has been given to the importance of involving children in research (Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011). This means that children's own priorities for their early adjustment to school remain poorly understood (O'Farrelly *et al*., 2019). Reasons for children's absence in the debate have been considered:

"…discourses on readiness often exclude children from participating in such conversations. Young people are commonly viewed as inexperienced or incapable beings." (Peters *et al*., 2015, p. 44)

For O'Farrelly *et al*. (2019) however, consulting young children about the salient features of their early school experiences was a 'feasible' (p. 2) aim, and the results of their Children's Thoughts about School Study can be found in their Reconstructing Readiness report, the first of its kind they claim to provide a model of school adjustment based on children's priorities. Forty-two children's priorities were captured using mixed method interviews (e.g. using draw and talk activities and pictorial measures of wellbeing) and then organised into four key domains, broadly summarised as: feeling able; navigating friendships; supportive, playful environments; the bridging of school and family life (O'Farrelly *et al*., 2019). O'Farrelly *et al*. (2019, p. 12) surmised that the children

portrayed early school adjustment as a multi-faceted and deeply social construct:

"Central to what matters to children is a sense of mastery, connectedness and inclusion, supportive spaces to be creative and playful, and strong ties between school and family lives."

A further round of deductive analysis revealed that many of the children's priorities, such as those relating to their self-efficacy and creativity, are only partially captured by typical 'school readiness' outcomes, while priorities relating to supportive school environments and enjoyment of school tend to be overlooked (O'Farrelly *et al*.'s, 2019). Interrogating school readiness benchmarks in this way led O'Farrelly *et al*. (2019) to recommend a new model of school adjustment, which emphasises children's motivational attributes. Their model they believe is a timely contribution for advancing 'school readiness' frameworks and identifying new outcomes for supporting children and schools (O'Farrelly *et al*.'s, 2019). The results of O'Farrelly *et al*.'s (2019) study also led me think about how the children's ideas presented in this thesis might help reconfigure the purpose of early years education – could it be that rather than use the Reception year to equip children with formal skills, we might use it to instil a love of school and learning? Would these attributes not be of greater influence to children's future success? I return to these wonderings in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

While O'Farrelly *et al*. (2019) consider their research with young children to be a unique contribution to the field of 'school readiness' they acknowledge that other researchers have sought young children's views about school. Perhaps the most well known of the studies they cite is the Starting School Research Project by Dockett and Perry (2002, 2003) which investigated children's perspectives about their transition to school. In this study (based in Australia) children commented on two major areas: they emphasised the importance of knowing the rules in order to start school, and expressed their feelings about school (Dockett and Perry, 2003). Children's positive comments about school also tended to relate to having or making friends (Dockett and Perry, 2003). Dockett and Perry (2002, p. 85) concluded that success in school, as in many aspects of life, "is about relationships, as well as about what is known, and the skills one has". Of the UK studies cited by O'Farrelly *et al*. (2019), Keating *et al*.'s (2000) work is perhaps the most relevant to this thesis, given that they explored Reception children's perceptions of work and play. Children's comments indicated that they saw work as sitting at a table with pencil and paper (Keating *et al*., 2000). Playing, on the other hand, consisted of activities such as painting, Lego, paper, crayons and the 'wooden bricks' (Keating *et al*., 2000). More crucially, some children saw play as inferior to work, a view that teachers believed was perpetuated by parents' opinions about the purpose of school (Keating *et al*., 2000). However, participating teachers also admitted that their ability to provide for children's play experiences was limited by other demands, such as the pressure to deliver and assess a formal curriculum (Keating *et al*., 2000). It is therefore not surprising that some of the children in Keating *et al*.'s (2000) study did not see play as important as work.

Two further studies involving young children indicate that play is an important part of children's early years experience. This was evident in the findings of a study carried out in Iceland, which sought the views of 20 six- and seven-year-old children on their first month at primary school (Einarsdottir, 2010). Many of the children who took part perceived reading, writing, and mathematics as the main purpose of their education (Einarsdottir, 2010). Free time, playtime, and playing with other children were cited as the most enjoyable parts of school (Einarsdottir, 2010). For Einarsdottir (2010, p. 177), such findings brought ideas about 'playschool', primary school, and democracy to the fore:

"Playschool was for them a place where they could play with their friends most of the time and make choices within certain limits (Einarsdottir 2005b). When they came to primary school, they seemed more or less to accept the radical changes in the curriculum and the demands made on them."

The way Einarsdottir (2010) encouraged children to reflect on their preschool experiences aligns with the work McGettigan and Gray (2012), who sought primary-aged children's perspectives (n=22) on their early years experiences in rural Ireland. Children noted that they had fewer toys and play experiences in school compared to preschool, although these differences were not necessarily viewed in negative terms (McGettigan and Gray, 2012). What was less appealing about the primary classroom was the requirement for children to sit for longer periods of time (McGettigan and Gray, 2012). These responses lend further support to the idea that learning in primary school is more formal

and goal-oriented (McGettigan and Gray, 2012). The advice the children offered for new school starters also revealed some interesting ideas about 'readiness':

"Their suggestions include 'learning how to write', 'learning not to cry', 'not to be shy' and to 'be good'. Also mentioned was the importance of learning the rules including where and when to line up for class, listening for the school bell and listening to adults." (McGettigan and Gray, 2012, p. 26)

It is worth noting that for many children in McGettigan and Gray's (2012) study, starting primary school meant becoming familiar with a new school setting. By contrast, transition into primary school (Year 1) for the majority of children in England does not involve a change of schools, rather it is the shift in pedagogical approaches between Reception and Year 1 that is fundamental to 'school readiness' in England:

"As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1" (DfE, 2017, p. 9).

Discussions by Linklater (2007) and Cullingford (2006) present a useful final colouring to this discussion of children's perspectives. First of all, Linklater's (2007) study offers similarities to those already discussed in the sense that she sought ideas from three Reception children, relating to their values for the year. Ideas were collected using a play-based activity, with children being asked to

create items for a model Reception classroom. Linklater (2007) describes the way the children began by filling the classroom with tables and chairs, and figures sitting down. However, the children soon declared it was playtime and rushed the figures outside (Linklater, 2007). From there, much of the children's small-world play occurred 'outdoors' where they interacted with animals, played games and enjoyed being away from the direction of the teacher (Linklater, 2007). For Linklater (2007, p. 75), the children's 'outdoor' play was revealing of their broader perceptions of school:

"Throughout their play the children appeared to explain that their status involved deferring to adults. There emerged an understanding that, in school, the teacher defined the purpose for learning with a narrow focus on training children to perfect particular abilities. Outside of this were opportunities for playing."

Linklater's (2007) experience researching with Reception children also left her wondering how far we underestimate children's intellectual capabilities when we focus too acutely on their academic prowess. Cullingford (2006) offers a similarly positive portrayal of children' capabilities in focusing on children's own vision of schooling. The consensus in this article is that children are intelligent and realistic individuals (Cullingford, 2006) who can offer clear insights into the formal and informal aspects of school. For Cullingford (2006, p. 220), children also have the ability to see the education system for what it is:

"From the pupils' point of view the system to which they are made to adapt is

fundamentally flawed. It diminishes their capacities. It undermines their creativity. It strangles their intellectual adventure. This is not deliberate, but this is how it feels for the pupils."

Cullingford's (2006) championing of children's intelligence feels like an appropriate way to end this discussion of children's perspectives, which taken as a whole indicates both the value of children's contributions and children's relative lack of involvement in the 'school readiness' debate. These observations served as important starting points for my own 'school readiness' research. However, the research discussed in this particular section also offers something of a contrast to my own approach to researching with Reception children in my attempts to move 'beyond method' (Law, 2004) and engage in messy methodologies which value the complexity of children's ideas. This alternative approach meant rejecting the separation of data into boxes (St. Pierre, 2013) and the 'artificial neatness' (Strom *et al*., 2014) of traditional qualitative analysis, which has tended to characterise many studies of children's perspectives.

What came to my attention during my exploration of children's perspectives was how commonly 'school readiness' is conceptualised as a transition. This is observable in the underpinning philosophy of Docket and Perry's (2003) research and in O'Farrelly *et al*.'s (2019) interest in early 'school adjustment'. The notion of transition feels relevant to this project too, for the reason that I decided to carry out both Study One and Study Two (one year apart) in the second half of summer term, when the Reception children were being prepared

for their move to Year 1. My reason for choosing this time of year was initially because I wanted to explore Reception children's perception of this change. However, over the course of Study One, I came to realise that research with young children does not necessarily provide the clear-cut answers one might like, and so rather than try to translate children's ideas into 'effective' transition practice, I came to think with theory about how children's ideas might change the way we work with young children. In part, this involved questioning the abrupt change in pedagogy that children experience between Reception and Year 1 and challenging prevailing accounts of transition that presuppose it as a linear process (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2016). Usefully, the difference between Reception and Year 1 practice has been summarised by White and Sharp (2007: 87) in the following way:

"In the Foundation Stage children learn through an integrated play-based pedagogy. When children make the transition to Year 1, they experience a subject-based curriculum and a more 'formal' teaching style."

The appropriateness of viewing Reception as a transition year (as suggested by Tickell, 2011) has also been questioned (Early Excellence, 2017) as I will discuss in the next section.

What is Transition?

Transition is a recognised characteristic of human life and often relates to naturally occurring changes and rituals in people's lives (Brooker, 2008). In educational terms, transition generally refers to the process of moving from one

physical environment or set of relationships to another (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; White and Sharp, 2007; Sanders, *et al.*, 2005) or the 'continuity of experience' between different periods and spheres in children's lives (Kagan and Neuman, 1998). Children can be helped to think of transition as an exciting time of new opportunity and growing up (Brooker, 2008; Fabian, 2002), however it is also recognised that school transitions can be significant and challenging for all children (Fabian, 2002). In Western culture, educational transitions tend to take place on an annual cycle throughout a child's school life, due to the common practice of grouping children by age (Fabian, 2002; O'Farrelly and Hennessy, 2013). Of all these transitions, it is entry into more formal schooling that has become the dominant area of attention for policymakers, researchers and educators around the world (Huser *et al.*, 2016), in part because of the complexity of this transition and its potential to influence later school progress and outcomes (Dockett and Perry, 2003).

The concept of 'school readiness' is often invoked in discussions of transition because of the links between preschool experiences and later school success (Dockett and Perry, 2009). Brooker (2008) drew attention to these links by making a distinction between holistic understandings of transition as a process, and those put forward by policy-makers, which tend to concentrate on the 'readiness' of the child and the knowledge and skills they will need in a new setting. UNICEF's 'school readiness' framework of 2012 described a model of transition akin to Brooker's (2008) more 'holistic' interpretation. Rather than place emphasis on the 'readiness of the child', UNICEF's (2012) model necessitated partnership between schools, families and communities to equip

children with the characteristics required for school success. It also placed emphasis on schools' readiness for children, suggesting that teachers had a responsibility to adapt classrooms to children's unique developmental levels and needs (Ladd, 2006). Indeed, the notion of a 'ready school' has been a part of the 'school readiness' discussion for a number of years, as elucidated by the NEDP's 1998 'ready schools' report, and Tickell's (2011) review of England's EYFS. This stated: "schools need to be ready for children and children need to be ready for school. If this does not happen transition is harder for children than it needs to be" (Tickell, 2011, p.36). While striking a balance between ready schools and ready children might appear valuable, others (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2016) have suggested that this kind of dichotomy simplifies the heterogeneity of children's transition experiences.

Both government organisations (e.g. Ofsted) and researchers (e.g. White and Sharp, 2007) have acknowledged that moving from Reception to Year 1 represents a potentially difficult transition for children in the English education. In 2004, Ofsted reported that primary schools generally supported this transition effectively, but that the requirement for children to make 'good progress' sometimes resulted in abrupt changes in teaching approaches (Ofsted, 2004). In a later study commissioned by the Government's Sure Start Unit (Sanders *et al*., 2005), teachers indicated that most children coped well with the change, but that the different types of curricula posed a significant challenge to helping children make this transition (Sanders *et al*., 2005). Based on this evidence, Sanders *et al*. (2005), suggested that policy-makers needed to provide advice about how elements of the Foundation Stage could be

incorporated into Year 1 classrooms, such as by increasing children's opportunities for learning through play (Sanders *et al*., 2005). Consequently, a DVD training package called 'Continuing the Learning Journey' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2005) was released, which aimed to establish a shared understanding and value of effective Foundation Stage practice. This guidance strongly supported the idea that Year 1 teachers should build on early years practice and be flexible in their approaches to meeting children's needs. Undoubtedly, many early years professionals welcomed these materials, particularly given the emphasis on continuing play into Year 1 (Carruthers and Worthington, 2006); although for some the Literacy and Numeracy strategies somewhat overshadowed the guidance (Fisher, 2010). The findings of the recent Hundred Review (Early Excellence, 2017), also suggest that recommendations to adopt early years approaches in Year 1 have not been implemented in a wholesale way, as teachers continue to describe the discontinuity in curricula as a significant transition issue. These findings also affirm previous concerns shared by Reception teachers, who had foreseen that the foundation stage might create a greater gap between Reception and Year 1 (McInnes, 2002). Such 'chasms' or 'gaps' between 'preschool' and 'school' are a widely reported challenge to transition across the globe (Dunlop, 2007; Fabian, 2002; Peters, 2014).

The findings of a study (White and Sharp, 2007) which sought children's views about their transition to Year 1 appear to validate teachers' concerns about discontinuity. As in my own approach in Study One, White and Sharp (2007) carried out two rounds of discussions with groups of children (6 in each of 12

case study schools) in the summer and autumn of 2014, before and after their transition to Year 1. The findings from the study indicated that transition to Year 1 in the most part had been smooth and that children relished 'growing up' and 'getter bigger'. However, children's responses also indicated that changes in the physical environment and the curriculum had affected their enjoyment of learning. As a consequence, White and Sharp (2007) suggested that Year 1 teachers should be encouraged to provide more opportunities for active, independent learning and learning through play. Tellingly, in the years since these findings were published such advice does not seem to have been taken up, as indicated in Ofsted's (2017, p.4) Bold Beginnings report:

"Reception and Year 1 teachers agreed that the vital, smooth transition from the foundation stage to Year 1 was difficult because the early learning goals were not aligned with the now-increased expectations of the national curriculum."

Indeed, it would appear that the latest iteration of the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) (which has been described as 'more demanding', DfE, 2012) has done little to address teachers' concerns about transition.

While there is no explicit mention of transition in the current EYFS framework (DfES, 2017) in terms of children's move out of the early years into Year 1, there are some phrases within the guidance that offer an indication for how transition should 'look'. Firstly, it could be interpreted that the suggested shift towards more adult-led learning in Reception is considered an important part of

children's transition. The Teaching Schools Council (2016) advised that this might involve movement in classroom layout over the course of the year, as well as the 'high quality' delivery of core skills to prepare Reception children for the 'challenges' of Year 1. Secondly, the EYFS framework (DfE, 2017) suggests that completed assessment 'profiles' should be used to support a dialogue between Reception and Year 1 teachers, to help plan appropriate Year 1 activities (DfE, 2017). It would seem that collaboration between Reception and Year 1 teachers is therefore encouraged, as part of the transition process. This interpretation is further supported by Tickell's (2011) review of the EYFS, in which she emphasised the importance of Reception and Year 1 teachers working together to ensure continuity in children's experiences. Within her review, Tickell (2011) also suggested that children who were not toilet trained or able to listen would find the transition to Year 1 particularly challenging. This statement indicates something of the kinds of skills and competences that are valued by Reception and Year 1 teachers in relation to transition between the adjacent years, and, more broadly, 'school readiness'.

Transition, and the idea that children do not live in isolation, could be considered from a theoretical perspective such as using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological development model, which consisted of four interrelated system levels: macro-, exo-, micro-, and meso. Such conceptual models have been used to facilitate common understandings about the nature of effective transition and how to help children experience continuity across the different areas of their lives. Similarly, in their discussion of higher education, Taylor and Harris-Evans (2016) use concepts taken from Deleuze and Guattari (becoming,

rhizome and assemblage) to think differently about transition. These concepts helped Taylor and Harris-Evans (2016) tune into the 'detail, density and difference of each student's experiences' (p. 4) and produce a more nuanced understanding of change:

"Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari of transition as assemblage highlights transitioning as an active making and unmaking of the 'thing' called 'transition'. This provokes us to attend to the elements that each student assembles within their individual transitioning, to how those elements work together, and how they are put to work via connections."

The way in which Taylor and Harris-Evans (2016) put the concept of 'becoming' to work in their analysis of students' experiences also helped them activate transition as a verb, not a noun, as an emergent, dynamic and constitutive event of transitioning. In their conclusion, they emphasise that transition is not a neat, unifying package of skills or a temporal or spatial linear process. Describing transition in this way aligns with my own attempts to broaden narrow conceptualisations of 'school readiness', many of which do not account for the day-to-day, affective moments that make each child's transition*ing* experience unique and unpredictable (Taylor and Harris-Evans, 2016).

The Non-Ready Child

Some of the literature discussed in this chapter paints a positive picture of 'school readiness'. Such literature has likely contributed to the notion that 'school readiness' is a positive and necessary objective for all young children

to attain (Tager, 2017). I will now consider the work of Tager (2017) who has written at length about the 'school readiness' agenda and the notion of non-ready children. One of the points Tager (2017) makes early on in her book is that a non-ready child (in America) is in most cases identified as non-white, and from a low-income background, or put more directly, "this child is outside the system even before he enters the system, and once inside is quickly identified as not fitting into the early childhood schooling structure". Tager (2017) prefaces this point, with a description of a young girl called Lila, who according to her teacher did not adapt well to the culture of an American public school. Lila was also identified as African American and non-verbal (Tager, 2017). Tager (2017) makes this point to exemplify her view that 'school readiness' has become a deficit-based, discriminatory practice:

"Teachers, now more than ever, due to higher demands/expectations, are being forced to push school readiness practices inside the classroom, and this is detrimental to their pedagogical practices. This fosters an expectation of inappropriate practices, pushing down the curriculum and expanding the gap between White middle-class children and low-income Black children." (p. viii)

In the English context, it could be inferred that children labelled White and working-class are those most likely to be marginalised by 'school readiness' policy in the way Tager (2017) describes:

"White children who are eligible for free school meals are consistently the lowest performing group in the country, and the difference between their

educational performance and that of their less-deprived white peers is larger than for any other ethnic group" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014, p. 3).

To describe 'school readiness' as a discriminatory practice makes for powerful reading and, unlike UNICEF (2012), Tager (2017) leaves us questioning the impact of the 'school readiness' agenda. We might also be left wondering about another fundamental question, "*why aren't schools getting ready for children?*" (Peters *et al*., 2015, p. 38).

Tager's (2017) discussion prompted me to think about the image that appears at the end of the Willis' (1988) Dr Xargle book, which shows the aliens in 'disguises' ready to board a ship to visit 'real earthlets'.

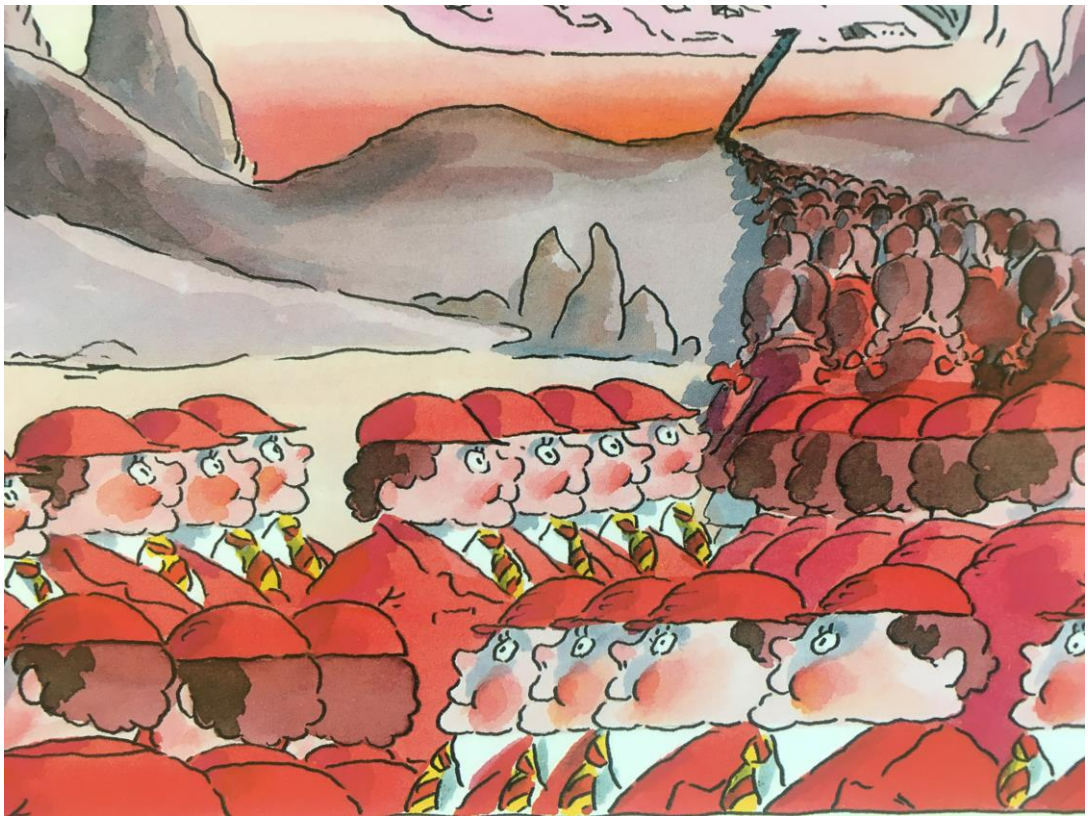


Image 2. Aliens in disguise (Willis, 1988)

What feels significant having read Tager's (2017) discussion, is the type of disguise all the aliens are wearing. The blazers and caps for example, look similar to a British public school uniform. The skin colour of the disguises can also not be overlooked. Earth does not appear to welcome diversity. Could we therefore say that this image offers a poignant representation of Tager's (2017) discussion? Does wearing a white, middle-class 'disguise' give you a better chance of fitting in on our Earth? Certainly, if we follow Tager's argument, then this appears to be the case. Also pertinent to this discussion is the view that 'school readiness' is a process that prioritises white middle-class values and interests (Tager, 2017; Doucet and Tudge, 2007). Thus, in choosing these disguises, perhaps Dr Xargle shows us that he knows more about 'school readiness' than first thought. Perhaps he knows that 'school readiness' is not

just about being ready for formal schooling, it is also about conforming and having to fit into a particular school culture (Cooney, 1995). With their smiles and their smart uniform, Dr Xargle's class of aliens certainly look the part.

Part 2: Thinking with Theory

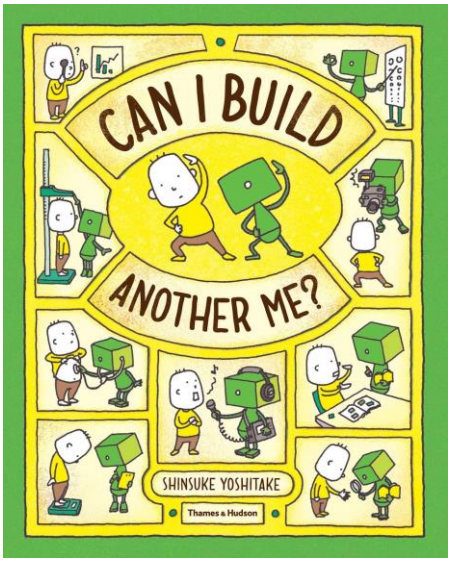
"Thinking, Deleuze insists, is an event that happens to us (…) Thinking invades us (…) There is no 'us', no subject or individual, that precedes and controls the act of thought."

(Colebrook, 2002, p. 3)

'Thinking with theory' is a phrase borrowed from the title of Jackson and Mazzei's (2012, p. 1) book that was written to "challenge qualitative researchers

to use theory to think with their data (or use data to think with theory)". Not only does the book emphasise the value of theory, the way it can transform data, and produce something new, it also encourages researchers to be attentive to their theoretical perspectives on voice, truth, and meaning. In addition to this, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe their work thinking with people (or theorists), and with 'concepts-on-the-move' as being more useful than their efforts to think with larger theoretical frameworks. Taking on board these sentiments, I will now offer an account of the theory, theorists and theoretical concepts that I 'plugged into' in my efforts to stretch, expand, and distort narrow ways of knowing about 'school readiness'. This includes trying to provide an account of a broad set of ideas relating to post-structuralism, and the work of a range of theorists including Deleuze (and Guattari), Rancière and Foucault.

Can I build another me?



I leave traces of me.

You can tell where I've been even when I'm not there.

I am a human machine.

I'm ever-changing.

(Yoshitake, 2015, various pages)

Can I build another me? This is the question asked by Yoshitake (2015) through protagonist Kevin, who tries to teach a robot how to be 'him' - a task that Kevin soon discovers is a lot more complicated than first thought. As Kevin explains to the robot, "everyone sees me in a slightly different way." Kevin also tries to help the robot understand that he plays 'different roles' depending on where he is: "There are lots of versions of me, but all of these are me!" (Yoshitake, 2015). On one level 'Can I build another me?' (Yoshitake, 2015) could be seen as a celebration of uniqueness; a prompt to make children think about who they are. At the same time Yoshitake's (2015) picture book could be used to open up

complex philosophical enquiries relating to the human subject. What does Kevin mean when he says he is ever-changing? And in what kinds of complex ways do we leave traces of ourselves in the world? Such questions have been at the heart of my own wonderings about 'school readiness' and it is only through my engagement with the work of Deleuze and various other theoretical lenses such as post-structuralism, that I have come to see things differently. As Colebrook (2001, 2002) explains, Western thought has always been committed to static models of identity and to the idea that an ultimate 'being' becomes differentiated. This is hinted at in Yoshitake's (2015) book with Kevin suggesting that growing 'much bigger' does not change who we are inside as if we have an inner, authentic self (Image 3). Presenting Kevin in this way, with a sense of continuity, and as though he is a conscious individual in charge of his 'desires and identifications' (Lather, 2009) can be aligned with a humanist perspective.

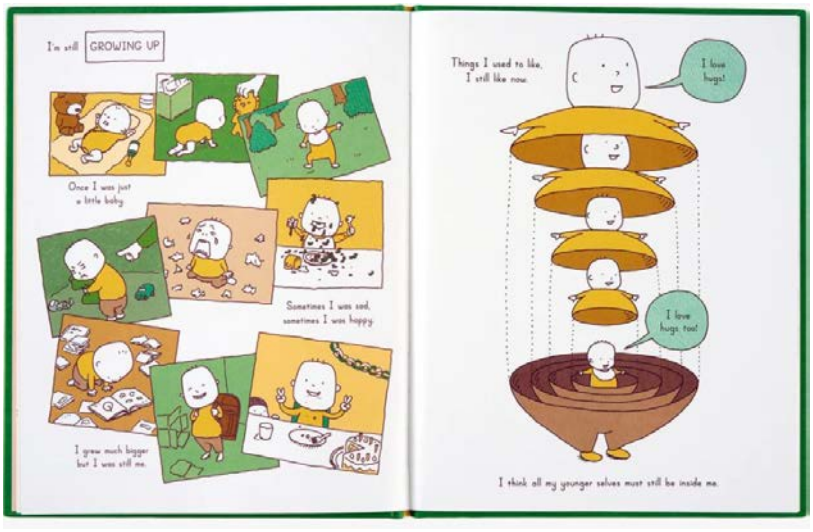


Image 3. "Can I Build Another Me?" Yoshitake (2015)

Deleuze however, would likely not accept this kind of conventional thinking. Instead he offered an "antidote to being and identity" (Sellers, 2013, p. 79) through his notion of becoming. For Deleuze, becoming is never finalised and complete, it is not a linear process between two points, rather "connections and micro-events create tiny explosions that keep new creations on the move" (Youngblood-Jackson, 2010, p. 583). Deleuze also transgressed typical images of children and childhood by suggesting, it is "the becoming itself that is the child" (Deleuze and Guarttari, 1987, p. 277), not child becoming adult (Sellers, 2013). This way of thinking puts a somewhat more complicated spin on the question 'Can I build another me?' because with Deleuze, we do not simply take up different roles in different places, as Kevin suggests, rather we move through unique events, always in the flow of becoming something different (Sellers, 2013). Deleuze's philosophy therefore offers an antithesis to narrow conceptualisations of 'school readiness', which tend to endorse linear, traceable continuums, and dogmatic images of thought, whereby all subjects are seen to sense and make sense of things the same way (Snir, 2018). Evans' (2013) linking of 'readiness' and 'becoming' offers an interesting reinforcement of this point:

"…becoming-ready is never a concrete or finalized state as it happens continuously, over and over again in the complexity of daily life. The event of becoming-ready can never be predicted or prescribed in advance." (p. 182)

Importantly, Evan's (2013) use of Deleuzian theory resonates with my own efforts to disrupt 'school readiness' policy, a policy that does not necessarily

align with one of the EYFS' (DfE, 2017) overarching principles:

"Every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured." (p. 6)

How far does 'school readiness' policy allow us to cherish difference and celebrate this kind of child, the child who is constantly learning and imbued with the potential to be capable and confident? In Part 2 of this chapter I aim to situate my work within Deleuzian research more fully. Deleuze's collaborations with Guattari (1987) and Parnett (1987, 2007) are recognised as part of this discussion.

While Yoshitake's (2015) book offers some arguably conventional conceptualisations of self, the complexity of children's lived experiences is readily observed, unlike in 'school readiness' policy. For this reason, 'Can I build another me?' is a useful starting point for discussing the theoretical ideas that have influenced this project, for they also rouse complex modes of thought. Another of the perspectives I will discuss in this chapter is post-structuralism - a "loosely connected body of work" (MacLure, 2003, p. 174) that (like Deleuze) acknowledges the "impossibility of organising life into closed structures" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 2). Indeed, post-structuralist thinkers tend to embrace the world as 'radically indeterminate' (MacLure, 2013) and explore the way languages, organisms, cultures and political systems change over time (Colebrook, 2002). Relatedly, post-structuralist thinkers typically reject ideas associated with universal truths and the self-aware humanist subject:

"Poststructural theorists argue that subjects are constituted within discourses that establish what it is possible (and impossible) to be (…) Discourses in post-structuralism involve much more than language (…) they can be thought of, rather, as practices for producing meaning, forming subjects and regulating conduct within particular societies and institutions at particular historical times." (MacLure, 2013, p. 175)

As such, post-structuralism offers resources for critiquing and prying apart institutions such as schools, where good intentions and practice are often taken for granted (Peters and Burbules, 2004, MacLure, 2013). It is for this reason that post-structuralist modes of thought have come to underpin my suspicion of the 'school readiness' agenda and the reason, order and certainty that it promotes.

As signposted previously, the aim of Part 2 of this chapter is to discuss the key theoretical ideas that have given direction to this project. This section might therefore be described as a theoretical framework, defined by Ravitch and Riggan, (2016) as an aggregation of the formal theory that researchers use to ask new questions of the topic under study. For Ravitch and Riggan (2016) a theoretical framework is a component part of a researcher's conceptual framework, a view that also indicates that these terms should not be used synonymously. Marshall and Rossman's (2011) discussion of conceptual frameworks aligns closely with Ravitch and Riggan's (2016) sentiments:

"Convincing readers that a study is significant and worthwhile entails building an argument that connects one's research to key theories and theoretical perspectives, policy issues, problems of practice, or social and political issues and realities that affect people's lives and society more broadly." (Marshall and Rossman, 2011)

To think of a theoretical framework as a part of my broader argument or justification is a helpful way of articulating the purpose of the discussion to come. It is also useful that Ravitch and Riggan (2016) define a theoretical framework as an *integration* of formal theory rather than a description of it, helpful because I try not to describe post-structuralism and Deleuzian philosophy in the abstract. To do so would be to contradict the tenets of post-structuralism, (if it even has any) and Deleuze - a philosopher who encouraged people to 'use' his ideas, rather than interpret them (Rajchman, 2000). Instead my overall aim is to show what I have gleaned from certain theoretical ideas, and from researchers who have employed similar perspectives to guide their approach. Here, the phrase 'theoretical ideas' is used to further acknowledge how complex it is to provide a coherent theoretical framework when the 'theory' itself is so broad and indefinable:

"It is difficult to talk of 'aims' in relation to post-structuralism because it is not possible, strictly speaking, to ascribe specific aims to a cultural moment that is more like a complex variety of thought or a movement (in the musical sense) than a school, a doctrine, or a body of theory." (Peters and Burbules, 2004)

Thus, phrases like ‘post-structuralist thinkers’ and post-structuralism are used in this discussion with caveat.

In the same way that a conceptual framework should be ever evolving (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch and Riggan, 2016), the theoretical ideas guiding this research grew, changed and emerged unpredictably over time. This is why I am reluctant to use the term ‘framework’ in a wholesale way, for it suggests that my work with theory was static and stable. It is also the case that many of the ideas I used to rethink ‘school readiness’ only came to light after a first round of data collection (Study One), in response to the children’s ideas - data and theory made themselves ‘intelligible to one another’ (Mazzei, 2014). In an attempt to be true to this process, the proceeding discussion does not include all of the theoretical ideas that have inspired me. Some also emerge during data analysis in Chapters 4 and 5 when I use multiple theoretical concepts in specific contexts to help read the children’s ideas. I hope this emphasises to the reader how important Reception children were to my ‘becoming-theoretical’ in this project.

In the remainder of this chapter I discuss: (1) Post-structuralism and relevant examples of post-structuralist research, many of which also use Deleuzian ideas, (2) the importance of Deleuzian ideas to my work, (3) perspectives on voice, power and authenticity, (4) why theories of play are relevant to this project and (5) I conclude, rather unconventionally, with a research story from Study One.

Post-structuralist Paradigm

Common to many writers' accounts of post-structuralism is the idea that it is hard to disentangle and define. This uncertainty could be attributed to the perceived interdisciplinary nature of post-structuralism and its association with a range of theoretical and political influences (Peters, 1999; Weedon, 1997). However, it is perhaps more useful to acknowledge that a definition of post-structuralism is in contradiction of its essence – "the inertia of closure and certainty" (Stronach and MacLure, 1997). In this way, post-structuralism is better thought of not as a movement, theory or set of theories, but as a non-specific, conceptual term to characterise the work of particular theorists. Based on this argument, I will not be trying to provide a coherent framework of pre-existing principles and assumptions for post-structuralism. Instead I aim to give a 'feel' for how post-structuralism has been used in research to 'disorganise' truth and find openings in educational policies, theories and practices, as is advocated by Stronach and MacLure, (1997). With no potential for certainty in post-structuralism, it is also considered useful to explore the intellectual and ideological positions post-structuralism is seen to reject (Hammersely, 2000; Peters, 1999). Consequently I will draw on these discussions of comparison to develop an understanding of how post-structuralist ideas can be used to underpin a critique of 'school readiness' policy.

Post-structuralism is most commonly written about in terms of its association with structuralism, which is not surprising given the indication within their names of a break in philosophical thought. Sarup (1993) outlined some of their continuities, suggesting that both structuralism and post-structuralism have made important contributions to human understanding, by offering critiques of

notions such historicism (the idea that there is an overall pattern in history), meaning, and philosophy. More specifically, both movements are seen to have dissolved the human subject by challenging the idea that subjects exists as ‘meaningful entities’ each with their own ‘essence’ (Colebrook, 2002). Discussions about structuralism and post-structuralism are also commonly characterised by their differences, particularly as post-structuralism could be seen (in rather simplistic, chronological terms) as a direct philosophical response to the ‘social scientific pretensions’ of structuralism (Peters, 1999). For this reason, it is helpful to develop an understanding of structuralism, to make sense of post-structuralist thinking.

Many of the central tenets of structuralism were developed before the twentieth century in connection with the study of meaning and language, and the analysis of relationships and structures (Hawkes, 2003). For structuralists, we always remain within structures, within systems of representation to which we are subordinate, and it is only through these systems that life can be understood (Colebrook, 2002). Correspondingly, structuralists also reasoned that it is not thought that differentiates the world but a system of language (Colebrook, 2002). This point indicates that language plays a central role in structuralist thinking:

“It (language) is not something we each bring with us into the world at birth but an institution into which we are gradually initiated in childhood as the fundamental element of all in our socialisation. Language can thus be described as impersonal, it exceeds us as individuals.” (Sturrock, 1979, p.12)

Many of the key structuralist thinkers, such as Levi-Strauss and Barthes, drew significantly on the theory of Swiss linguist Saussure (1857-1913) as a foundation for their theorising (Sturrock, 1979). Saussure (1974) viewed language as a system of signs, and he analysed these signs as being made up of two arbitrary and unrelated components, the signifier and the signified, where the signifier represents the spoken sound or the word on a page, and the signified represents 'the notion of a thing'– what comes to mind when the word is uttered (Sturrock, 1979). Thus, without the signified (the concept of meaning), what we say to each other is just a noise (Colebrook, 2002), a point also exemplified by Sturrock, (1979): "The signifier is what we can be sure of, it is material; the signified is an open question (…) meanings may and should coexist" (p.15). While this may appear a positive and common sense view of the world, with structuralism we do not have a world of meanings that we can re-present. Rather, the world is only made meaningful through structures (Colebrook, 2002). Indeed, Saussure (1974) asserted that meaning exists only as differences between signs rather than between words and objects (Callinicos, 1985; Belsey, 2002), and that these meanings become fixed by social conventions (MacNaughton, 2005). This view is exemplified by structuralist Levi-Strauss' examination of binary oppositions (such as rich/poor, or ready/unready), and his belief that such oppositions are fundamental to the organisation of language and human thought. Binary opposition theory emphasises the structuralist idea that meaning is contained in differences between signs, rather than within the individual - difference is a system imposed upon us (Colebrook, 2002). However, it has been suggested that structuralism

made only superficial attempts to grapple with the complex nature of difference (Belsey, 2002).

Saussure's (1974) view of language influenced structuralist thinking about the world. Structuralist thinking denotes that the nature of any entity or experience only makes sense in relationship to other elements and in terms of the structure of which it forms a part (Hawkes, 2003). This means we cannot understand something unless we first understand how it is different from something else. Linked to this idea, structuralists also characterise humans by their making and remaking of apparent structures that cause the world to seem meaningful. However, individuals' capacity to live as members of a culture depends on their understanding of how these structures work (Hawkes, 2003). Sapir (1949, p. 162) captured the structuralist views about language and culture in the following way:

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group."

Such words help to summarise key structuralist principles – that language is a self-contained structure, that it has the power to order human thinking and culture, and that "human beings as individuals are produced through the differentiations of social systems" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 19). Adopting this line

of thinking might therefore lead us to concede that children and teachers are somewhat powerless to contest the structures that shape early years education.

Post-structuralism is also concerned with the social conventions of language, and the structural linguistics of Saussure (1974). However, post-structuralist thinkers have drastically altered important aspects of Saussurian theory by moving beyond the view of a stable sign (Weedon, 1997; Sarup, 1993). In its place, post-structuralists tend to view language as the place where forms of social organisation are defined and contested, and where meaning is constituted (Weedon, 1997). Additionally, post-structuralists consider that language changes all the time and we can choose to intervene to alter meanings, norms and views, which our culture takes for granted (Belsey, 2002). Echoing these points, Colebrook (2002, p. 3) explained:

"Instead of studying life in closed systems, as the structuralists had done, post-structuralists looked at the opening, excess or instability of systems: the way languages, organisms, cultures and political systems necessarily mutate or become."

In this way, post-structuralism can open up possibilities for employing alternative means of representation. This is why post-structuralism resounded as a significant mode of thinking for this research, given my aim to challenge the structural, governing principles of 'school readiness' and to bring new meaning to the concept. To summarise, it could be said that post-structuralists draw on structuralism's philosophy of language, but they apply this philosophy

in a different way, including disrupting some key structuralist ideas about the nature of meaning and the agency of the individual in constructing meaning.

Researchers applying post-structuralist ideas have cited various theorists as influential to their work. These theorists include French philosophers Foucault and Derrida, both of whom offered radical views about the nature of truth and the 'politics of knowledge'. As an example, MacNaughton (2005) used Foucault's thinking to deepen her understandings of the relationships between knowledge and power in early childhood institutions, and to write reflectively about 'regimes of truth' formed by developmental discourses. MacNaughton (2005) used Foucault's reasoning to explore how teachers use these truths to normalise children, and to support her work striving for greater social justice and equity in education. Derrida's 'deconstruction' has also been linked to post-structuralist thinking, perhaps because Derrida used the concept of deconstruction to highlight the instability of meaning, as captured by Caputo (1997, p. 31) in the following summary:

"Every time you try to stabilise the meaning of a thing, to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away." (Derrida, 1997)

Writing about Derrida and education, Peters and Biesta (2009) suggested that deconstruction denotes a particular form of critique, which exposes and undermines the metaphysical nature of language and also offers an affirmative openness towards the 'unforeseeable incoming'. This view hints at the spirit of

possibility, in which Peters and Biesta (2009) present Derrida's theorising. By offering these examples (MacNaughton 2005; Peters and Biesta, 2009), my aim is to highlight the critical, yet hopeful spirit, with which I apply post-structuralist ideas in this research framework.

Of those most commonly associated with post-structuralist thinking, the work of Deleuze, and his collaborations with Guattari (1987) and Parnett (1977), have been particularly influential to my research. While it is unlikely that Deleuze would have considered himself to be a 'pure' post-structuralist thinker, he is included in the general movement of post-structuralism because of his efforts to overturn the structuralist belief that we know and experience our world through imposed structures of representation (Colebrook, 2002). Deleuze challenged this belief by questioning the very genesis of all those structures (such as language, culture, meaning or representation) and by pursuing a positive philosophy of difference (Colebrook, 2002):

"Instead of something distinguished by something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself (…) Lightning for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 37).

A structuralist account, by contrast, examines difference as part of a coherent system through which we know and understand the world. For Deleuze (1994), this is an unhelpful way of seeing difference because difference becomes reduced to the negative, "subordinated to identity (…) incarcerated with similitude and analogy" (p. 50). Accordingly, to rescue difference from its

'maledictory state', Deleuze (1994) emphasised an ontological view of difference that is positive and singular rather than imposed and structured (Colebrook, 2002) suggesting that there exists such a thing as '*difference in itself*' (Deleuze, 1994). May (2005) further explained that turning to difference in itself means accepting that difference is not given to us in the form of identity, instead "difference lies beneath and within the passing identities to which it gives rise" (p. 146). Deleuze's insistence on 'becoming' was crucial to this thinking because it allowed him to liberate difference from sameness, to break apart structures (Jackson, 2010), and to express the instability of thought (Colebrook, 2002). When difference is conceived in this way, as 'wild' and 'untamed' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 63) and as linked to becoming, life it would seem becomes filled with the possibility of new ideas and the incentive to think in not-yet-known ways:

"It is not so much a matter of being optimistic or pessimistic as of being realistic about the new forces not already contained in our projects and programs and the ways of thinking that accompany them. In other words, to make connections one needs not knowledge, certainty, or even ontology, but rather a trust that something may come out, though one is not yet completely sure what." (Rajchman, 2000, p. 7)

Deleuze's concept of 'difference-in-itself' can also provide a tool for examining the 'violent work' that identity and representation accomplish (Cochayne *et al*., 2017), which in the case of this thesis, is heavily linked to the 'school readiness' agenda, an agenda that frames difference negatively and 'papers over' (Cochayne *et al*., 2017, p. 14) the multiplicity of 'difference-in itself'. Positively,

with Deleuze we are invited to work with the idea that children do not fit into neat categories. We are invited to reject common sense. We are encouraged to conceive of our being as a matter no longer based in identity (Rajchman, 2001), and we are encouraged to confront our infinite, microscopic differences (Colebrook, 2002). With Deleuze, life unfolds using another logic (St Pierre, 2004). With Deleuze, there is hope:

"Resistance in the educational community to government mandates has already begun and will continue as we analyze the mechanisms of power that the Department of Education has put into place. We live in a time out of joint, a time of conservatism that threatens to overwhelm us at every turn, yet Deleuze helps us imagine a time to come in which the struggle may change." (St Pierre, 2004, p. 293)

'Difference-in-itself' is one of many Deleuzian concepts that can be used to 'think and live education differently'. This is exemplified in the proceeding discussion, in which I discuss a range of studies that have influenced my thinking. These studies cover themes such as identity in the early years workforce, contemporary literacies, the power of discourse, and the construction of human subjectivity. The studies referred to are only a small selection, and all use post-structuralism in slightly different ways, such is the fluidity of the term. However, they are representative of the kinds of studies that helped me understand how post-structuralism could be used to underpin my research. For example, some studies have used post-structuralism to elucidate the complexity of children's meaning making; likewise my research attempts to use post-structuralism to describe the complexities of children's meaning

making in the early years, and the way meanings seem to change from moment to moment (Burnett, 2014). Also relevant is the way post-structuralism has been used to illuminate the power of particular educational discourses. In the case of my research, this involves investigating the power and influence of 'school readiness' discourse upon early years practice. Many of the cited authors below also employ the work of Deleuze, and his collaborations with Guaratti, which is why such studies resonated particularly strongly with me.

Post-structuralism has been used to rethink and reposition aspects of early years education, including the identity of the early years workforce. For example, Ortlipp *et al*. (2011) adopted a post-structuralist stance in an examination of the discursive construction of early childhood practitioners' professional identities. Ortlipp *et al*. (2011) described the effect of a developmental discourse on practitioners' identities, when they are positioned as play facilitators, with responsibility for setting up 'developmentally appropriate' experiences for children. Ortlipp *et al*. (2011) went on to suggest that practitioners could use post-structuralism to reject this particular discourse and take on new kinds of identities using other available discourses. Likewise, Osgood (2006) discussed professionalism in early childhood education and highlighted some of the accepted truths that emerge out of dominant discourses, including those associated with neo-liberal conceptualisations of professionalism. Using post-structuralism to establish new forms of subjectivity, Osgood (2006) suggested that practitioners have the potential to resist these discourses and develop 'critical consciousness', by taking part in training that develops critical reflexivity. Also relevant is Moss' (2006) analyses of common

images of the early years worker, where he tried to show that practitioners could contest these images by using a post-structuralist lens to reflect on their own values about education. Overall, this research points to the importance of promoting regular reflective discussions amongst early years practitioners about their practice. In support of this view, I shared examples of children's ideas (collected during Study One) with Reception teachers, as a means of encouraging reflective dialogue about 'school readiness'. This process will be discussed in greater detail during Chapter 3.

In a different area of educational research, post-structuralism has been used to challenge simple views of literacy that have been validated by the reform agenda in education. A specific, and particularly pertinent approach relative to my project is the work of Burnett and Merchant (2016), who contributed to this field by using post-structuralism to think differently about life in the primary classroom. This included mobilising 'baroque' sensibilities relating to art history to animate their literacy research and to present rich and evocative accounts of children's virtual world play. Burnett and Merchant (2016) argued that post-structuralist readings help develop 'indeterminate' and 'ephemeral' accounts of children's educational experiences, which are important for prompting educators and researchers to explore the complexities of contemporary literacies. In their account, Burnett and Merchant (2016) cite Foucault's (1977) 'regime of truth' in relation to simple views of literacy, and use several concepts derived from Deleuze & Guattari (1987), such as 'multiplicity' and 'rhizome', to highlight the affective, embodied dimensions of children's meaning-making - dimensions that are often written out of official accounts of literacy. Similarly,

my research uses post-structuralism to try and destabilise simple perspectives of 'school readiness' and children. A number of stories collected during Study Two of my project could also help expand narrow views of literacy, given that they bear a similar richness and complexity to the examples offered by Burnett and Merchant (2016).

A poststructural framework was similarly used in another example of digital literacy research. Honan (2009) used a post-structural lens to 'unsettle' her observations of the use of digital texts across several primary classrooms. This research was set against a backdrop of increasing accountability in Australian schools, resulting in teachers 'drowning' in normative views of literacy and 'unrewarding pedagogical practices' (Honan, 2009). Deleuze and Guarttari's (1987) 'rhizome' was pivotal to Honan's (2009) discussion, helping her to articulate the complex relationships she observed between ideas, people and objects within the classrooms:

"In Deleuze and Guattari's work, a rhizome is a ceaseless network of connections that can be explored through the following and tracing of particular lines of flight across, within and without the network." (Honan, 2009, p. 23)

However, Honan (2009) used the rhizome to suggest that the new technologies did not always prompt teachers to develop different pathways, as might be expected. In her study, Honan (2009) observed teachers working with new digital texts in traditional ways, thus highlighting the influence of certain pedagogical accounts of literacy on teachers' decision-making in the

classroom. Honan's research (2009) resonated with my own, given the dissonance I perceived between children's rhizomatic explorations in my work with them during Study Two, and the linear, increasingly prescriptive nature of the early years curriculum. Based on Honan's research (2009) it is also easy to see how challenging it could be for teachers to develop new early years pedagogies in a climate of high stakes accountability. Indeed, Reception teachers have described the external pressures they have felt to move their practice towards a more formal approach (Early Excellence, 2017). These pressures are likely to restrict Reception teachers' ability to experiment with new practices.

Davies (2006, 2007, 2010, 2014) has spoken in several papers about her work as a post-structuralist researcher. In one example of her work (2010), she investigated discourses connected to 'behaviourally disturbed' children and teachers' interpretations of these. Davies (2010) tried to show how teachers draw on these discourses in ways that strip young people of their power and agency. In another piece of writing, Davies (2007) illuminated the issue of interpreting descriptions of human experience, and offered the reader multiple accounts of one experience, to recuperate the concept of experience within a post-structuralist framework. Writing from her own perspective, Davies (2007) concluded that accounts of experience should be read as a performance rather than a truth and the subject read as a person who is always becoming, including in exchanges with a researcher. Like other researchers drawing on post-structuralist perspectives, Davies (2007) underpinned her writing with Foucauldian ideas, including suggesting that "life continues to unfold in the

accounting of it, and the account making is, in that sense, always a new event, a new experience" (pp. 1141). In a more recent paper Davies (2010) evoked Deleuzian notions such as 'line of flight' and emergence to help open up a wider understanding of the subject and agency. Overall, Davies' writing has helped me to critique and document school readiness discourses and to celebrate the capacity of Reception children, by adopting an emergent view of their agency. With Davies' (2010) model, children are understood as having the capacity to generate new thought using intellect and imagination in a way that "exceeds the individual and his or her will" (p. 56). By contrast, other versions of agency describe children as having the ability to 'exercise agency' (Hemming and Madge, 2012) as linked to institutional coercion control and the perceived systematic denial of their agency.

Prior to moving on from this more general discussion of post-structuralist research, it is useful to affirm how post-structuralist ideas have provided inspiration in this project. Of importance first of all is the idea that post-structuralism places emphasis on the discourses, texts and dualisms (e.g. ready, not ready) that make up social institutions such as schools (Kenway *et al*., 1994; Davies, 1989). In these spaces, power and knowledge circulate unpredictably and subjects are always tenuous, in process and vulnerable (Davies and Gannon, 2005). In this way, post-structuralist ideas have provided modes of thought for drawing attention to the 'dangerous and debilitating conceits' (Humes and Bryce, 2003) of 'school readiness' discourse, a narrative that appears to have settled resolutely into the fabric of early childhood practice in England, as evidenced by research such as that of Roberts-Holmes' (2019),

which revealed how ability-grouping practices are being used to raise 'school readiness'-related standards. Post-structuralism also shows how binary oppositions shape particular kinds of being, which for 'unready' children means becoming marked, rather despairingly, as "other, as lacking, as not rational" (Davies and Gannon, 2005, p. 312). Yet, to work with post-structuralism is not necessarily a despairing process, because this way of thinking "gives just as much reason for hope" (Kenway *et al*., 1994). It encourages us to move beyond what is known and understood and to work with the belief that early years practice can be changed. There is also a sense, from the post-structuralist research discussed previously, that to challenge simple accounts of education (like those proffered by the 'school readiness' agenda) one must be willing to embrace complexity, multiplicity and the not-yet-known (Burnett and Merchant, 2016; Davies and Gannon, 2005). It is for this reason that I endeavored to use methods that embraced the complex qualities of children's lives and the 'thousand tiny differences' (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1988) that reside within them, trusting that the ideas that emerged would help disrupt narrow ways of thinking about 'school readiness'.

Voice

"In appearance there is nothing like that in the phenomenon of the voice." (Derrida, 1967 p. 65)

In 'Thinking with Theory' Jackson and Mazzei (2012) urge researchers to grapple with their perspectives on voice, truth and data. By being attentive to these concepts, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) came to understand that the

voices captured in their research, while only partial, produced 'excesses of meaning'. Likewise, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) came to work with the assumption that the 'truths' their participants offered were filtered, processed and already interpreted. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) admit that they did not arrive at these understandings on their own. Researching and writing under the influence of post-structuralist theories were important starting points for them. Working with specific theorists such as Deleuze and Foucault also helped them to form more nuanced understandings of such concepts. Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) advice offers a useful rationale for including my own discussion of voice, which describes how theory shaped my understanding and analysis of the Reception children's 'voices' found within this thesis - voices that became otherwise thought of as ideas, to signify the messy, multi-layered nature of voice and the inability of voice to represent a truth:

"Subjects might always have said something more, or something else, or something more true, or something deeper…" (MacLure *et al*., 2010 p. 495)

My discussion of children's voice in this section leads on to an exploration of issues such as power and authenticity.

Children's Voices

"If little children managed to make their protests heard in nursery school, or even simply their questions, it would be enough to derail the whole education system." (Deleuze, 2004, p. 208)

At the outset of this project, I felt very strongly about wanting to work directly with children in my research. This stemmed from personal values developed during my career as a primary school teacher and my specific experience of working with early years children. Inevitably, taking this approach created theoretical and methodological questions, including how to conceptualise children's involvement. This required me to explore various terms relating to children's perspectives, including consultation, participation, voice, and listening to children (Coleyshaw *et al.*, 2012). Exploring these terms revealed the complex nature of this subject area, particularly in relation to the term 'voice', and a need to 'unravel' and critique this concept:

"…critical, reflexive researchers need to reflect on the processes which produce children's voices in research, the power imbalances that shape them and the ideological contexts which inform their production and reception, or in other words issues of representation." (Spyrou, 2011, p. 151)

Indeed, childhood research is much more than thinking about children's voices heard in a literal sense, or thinking of voice as the verbal instrument of the individual (Komulainen, 2007). It is also about exploring the nature of the 'voice' which is attributed to children (James, 2007), developing an awareness of the complexities *within* children's voices (Elden, 2012), and raising critical questions about the limits of using voice in qualitative research (Ashby, 2011; Mazzei and Jackson, 2009). Encouragingly, Elden (2012) suggested it is possible to adopt a critical stance towards 'children's voice', whilst still incorporating children's narratives:

"…children's voices can challenge what is known. Science still and always will need the voices of people – small and large – who have been previously unheard. Not to represent something 'authentic', but to challenge the scientific imagination." (p. 78)

With a similar aim in mind (e.g. Mazzei, 2010, Maclure, 2009), I have chosen to draw on post-structuralist critiques of voice to develop a more informed, critical stance of the use of children's voices in this research.

It could be said that this project builds on a general rise in interest in promoting children's participation in the evaluation and development of practice. This growth in interest is intrinsically linked to the Rights of the Child Convention (Cremin and Slatter, 2004; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; James, 2007), which recognises children as human beings with a distinct set of rights. Such rights include consulting with children in decisions that affect them, both as individuals and as a group (Morgan *et al.*, 2002). Evidently, the concept of 'voice' has become nuanced in discussions of children's participation, and in the political discourse that has been inspired by the rights movement (Elden, 2012). In educational terms, 'voice' could be defined as the ways in which pupils are encouraged to take a more active role in their education (Whitty and Whisby, 2007). Within research, children's rights have been translated as a move to liberate the voice of subjects such as teachers and to access the practical knowledge of those on the 'inside' (MacLure, 2003). Discussions of children's voice also typically link to wider political trends of individualisation and

citizenship (Prout and Hallet, 2003; Harris and Manatakis, 2013) and to the 'new childhood studies' (Christensen and James, 2008), which have positioned children as articulate social commentators. As such, the impetus for mobilising the notion of children's voice has been linked to a range of social changes in thinking about children: children as citizens, rights bearers, and as social agents. Overall, these changes have challenged traditional assumptions about the nature of children often found in more conventional approaches to child research.

For some, the gathering movement of children's participation in society has been taken as a positive social trend (Prout and Hallet, 2003). Giving voice to children could help children to take control of important aspects of their lives, (Prout and Hallet, 2003), and to feel more valued as members of society (Barron, 2004). Others have made the case for using children's voices to challenge political ways of thinking about children and childhood (Prout and Hallet, 2003; Qvortrup, 2015). However, contributors, such as James (2007), have argued that children's positions as commentators remain patchy, particularly when conceptualisations of children as 'authentic' speakers are invoked. Fielding (2001) also probed the rhetoric and realities of the 'student voice' movement, in response to the rapid growth of literature emerging in the field. By asking questions, such as '*who* is allowed to speak?' Fielding (2001) sought to address the complexities of student voice (s) and to remind the reader that encounters of this nature are always framed by realities of power. Similarly, Komulainen (2011) suggested that discourses on 'child voice' are beset with ambiguities and ethical issues, including whether 'listening to children' is an

empowering or a rhetorical device. These concerns point to wider debates about the way 'children's voice' has come to be used in childhood research, and how researchers should go about accessing children's voices in the first place. For some authors (Lambert *et al*., 2013) using a variety of child-friendly data collection methods can be seen to enhance the accuracy and 'truthfulness' of voice research. However, this view does not necessarily reflect the messy, multi-layered character of children's voices.

Power and Voice

Explorations of 'voice' in research, have commonly acknowledged the link between power and participation. This is perhaps not surprising given the more general view that power is inherent in all research practices (Christensen, 2004), including in the relationship between researcher and participant (Pillow, 2010). Thus, many researchers have sought to 'balance' power relations (Karnieli-Miller *et al*., 2009) and to demonstrate how power has been 'shared' during the research process (Pillow, 2010). Within more specific discussions of 'pupil voice', links between power and voice have been described in 'empowering' terms, as *giving* young people agency and influence (Cook-Sather 2006; Whitty and Whisby, 2007). However, Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) suggested that inflections of power, work conversely to constrain young people's participation in social and political life. A similar issue is invoked in the idea that children have had to fight to be seen as reasonable, in the power of play between children and adults (MacNaughton, 2005). This view draws attention to the widespread tendency to think of adults and children as different types of humans (Qvortrup, 1994), and to think of children as a subordinate,

marginalised social group (Mayall, 2000). Consequently, power is one of a number of important ethical issues to be negotiated and conceptualised in this research project, as underpinned by children's perceived 'powerlessness' in society (Holt, 2004), and the idea that children themselves are aware of their own inferiority (Adler, 1928).

To expand further, issues of power in adult-child relations are often seen as posing challenges to promoting children's participation in research. These challenges include overcoming entrenched beliefs about children's age-based incompetence that prevent them being involved in decision-making processes (Raby, 2014). Questions of children's age-based competence could also be discussed in relation to the broader topic of children's rights. For example, Lundy (2007) suggested that applying Article 12 of the Rights of Child in the spirit it was intended could be seen as 'child-empowering' and 'transformative'. Yet, the nature of children's participation is dependent upon their age and level of maturity (Article 12, UNICEF, 1989). Children's participation therefore relies on the cooperation of adults, some of whom might be sceptical about children's capacity to contribute (Lundy, 2007). Questions relating to children's expertise could also be explored using Freire's (1968) account of traditional pedagogy, which he called the 'banking model of education'. In this account Freire (1968) indicated that traditional education posits children (the oppressed) as empty vessels and passive learners. If researchers adopted similar attitudes, children would not be seen as co-creators of knowledge, as is generally recognised in 'voice' research. Relatedly, Moss (2012) and Dahlberg *et al*. (2007) argued that 'school readiness' discourse is problematic for this very reason, for it posits

children as re-producers of knowledge, and as starting life with and from nothing.

Overall, these ideas point to the way that Western societies are often characterised by the widespread governing of children by adults (Gallagher, 2008b). However, this one-way, oppositional view of power is not necessarily useful for conceptualising children's participation, given the complexity of power in research spaces (Gallagher, 2008a, 2008b). Likewise, differences between adults and children do not have to be thought of as hierarchical (Holt, 2004). For the purpose of this project I wish to build on these views by drawing on the work of several key philosophers, including Foucault, Deleuze and Rancière, to develop a different conceptualisation of power.

Rethinking Power

'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure. (Foucault 1998, p. 63)

Issues of power are commonly related to Foucault, whose ideas provide a useful point of reference for this research. This is because Foucault (1982, p. 781) used different strategies to study the effects of power and the function of knowledge, to transform human beings into individual subjects:

“There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”

For Foucault (1982) this meant accepting that all subjects are equally placed in a complex network of power relations and that institutions should be analysed from this standpoint. Foucault (1982) also insisted that power does not exist in a tangible form as possessed by people, but only occurs when put into action (Foucault, 1982). As a result, Foucault’s work has been used to re-theorise children’s participation and to complicate the idea that researchers can ‘give’ power to children through participatory, adult-designed techniques (Gallagher, 2008a, 2008b). Using Foucault’s ideas, power can also be thought of in positive terms as having the potential to be resisted and changed (Barker, 1998). This view further complicates notions of power as a one-way exchange between adults and children or researchers and participants. For researchers, this means accepting that participants will act in unexpected ways, and that moments of resistance can offer fascinating insights (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

Gallacher and Gallagher’s (2008) findings align with my own research experiences, such as in Study One, when some of the most thought-provoking moments fell outside my own research aims and expectations. For example, some children used a classroom-drawing task for their own purposes, such as to illustrate themselves as taller than their peers or to chat at length about their

love for gaming. It was partly for this reason that I was keen to develop a more open-ended research space for Study Two ('Ideas Club'), in order to embrace children's unexpected responses and to complicate existing discourses that position subjects in relations of empowerment and disempowerment.

Like the work of Foucault (1982), Deleuzian ontology could also be used to think beyond simple binaries of the powerful and powerless to see the complexity and multiplicity of power relations. For this project, this includes rethinking power using several interrelated concepts such as 'affect 'and 'lines of flight', as inspired by the work of other researchers. To take an example, Sellers (2013) problematised traditional hierarchal notions of 'empowerment' by using examples of children's 'power-fullness' from her own research. These examples included children's confrontational questions, and their working together to dismiss Sellers' (2013) research agenda. In this discussion, Sellers (2013) used a Deleuzian understanding of power – to see power as a force flowing back and forth in a continuous motion between relations, and to see power as 'affect'. In turn, Sellers (2013) described children's power-fullness as their ability to 'close down' the adult/child binary and to disturb discourses, which position children as needy, incapable individuals. Sellers (2013) also admitted that it was not until later in her analysis that she became aware of her own part in provoking children's power-fullness in instances when she slipped into assuming power as an 'all-knowing' researcher. Through these examples Sellers (2013) offers a means of seeing power as accessible by adults *and* children (Sellers, 2013). We could also say that Seller's (2013) conceptualisation of the child as 'power-full' aligns with Deleuze's desire to

present the child as a ‘vector of affect’, and ‘an activator of change’ (Hickey-Moody, 2013). To present children as ‘affective’ and ‘power-full’ aligns with the values underpinning this research project and offers a means of conceptualising children’s position in this research.

Opening out beyond Seller’s (2013) interpretation of ‘power-full’ children, Adler’s (1928, 1930) theory of individual psychology could offer a relative way of thinking about children’s private logic for acting in ‘power-full’ ways. In his text, ‘Understanding Human Nature’, Adler (1928) claimed that young children are very aware of their own inferiority because they exist in a world full of adults. Alder suggested (1928) that such knowledge compels many children to strive for recognition, superiority and power (Adler, 1928). They are also motivated to grow, to become strong and to prove they can do anything (Adler, 1928). Adler’s theory (1928) could be illustrated using one of Alemagna’s (2016) double page spreads, which includes an image of a smiling young girl, glancing sideways towards a picture of an adult (Image 4). The text on the opposite page (Image 4) then alludes to the appeal of adulthood - adults are free, while children are not; adults seemingly have the power to decide things for themselves, while children cannot. In both Adler (1928) and Alemagna’s (2016) view, children appear to want to move towards adulthood in haste. The idea that children are aware of their own inferiority also seems to be supported by the following response offered by a child during the piloting phase of Study Two: “A child is a little grown up who doesn’t know much”. That means they have to go to school.” This is a comment I come back to in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

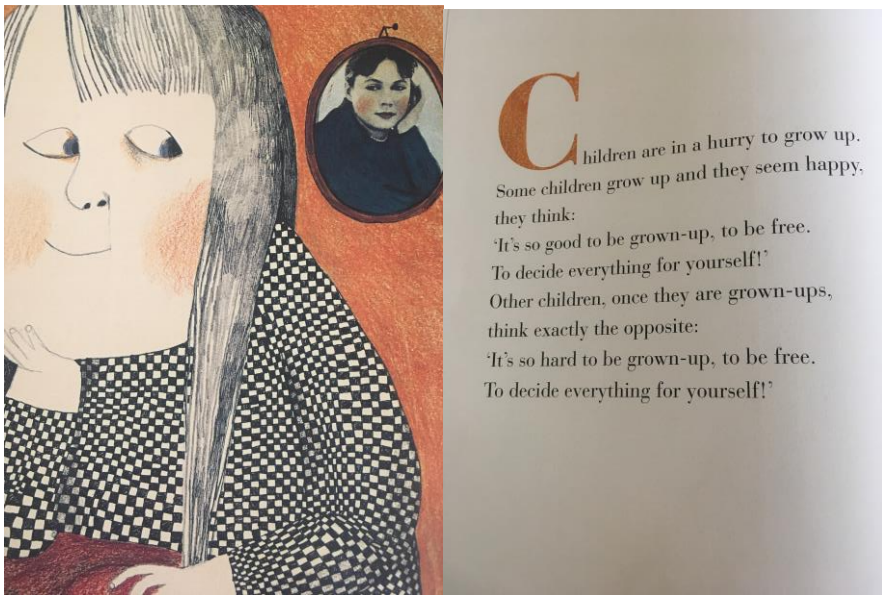


Image 4. "Children are in a hurry to grow up". Alemagna (2016)

Building on Adler's (1928) theorising, we could view children's 'power-full' actions, as their need to offset feelings of inferiority and subjection. However, I would argue that colonising children's desires using this framework alone, leads us to place too much emphasis on children's desire for adulthood and a child's identity as a future adult, which then closes down new ways of thinking about children as 'becoming'. Furthermore, using Adler's (1928) framework, children's desires could be interpreted as a negative condition, as felt by Adler's account of children's needs. Olsson, (2009) argued that institutions such as schools tend to construe children's desires using a similar negative logic so they can fulfil their role of giving children what they 'need'. Thus, it might be that we need a different way of thinking about desire, if we are to position children in a more 'power-full' light. Deleuze, for example, asserted that desire does not begin from lack; lack is created through social production. In its place, Deleuze expressed desire as a positive, affirmative and productive force (Gao, 2013).

For Olsson (2009), Deleuze's 'desire as production' allowed the pre-school teachers in her study to look for ways that children's desires 'deployed themselves' away from the institution's existing structures. This meant the teachers no longer 'tamed' children's desires by judging them using predetermined schemes; instead they tried to connect with the new realities, or 'lines of flight', the children were producing. For Lester, (2013) this same logic suggests that teachers can become co-constructors of 'lines of flight' with children. However, this process requires teachers to think differently about their role, beyond that of judge and authoritarian, to become something 'other than adult' (Lester, 2013). For me, this approach marked a challenging, yet motivating way of carrying out research with children.

To be clear, when I connected Deleuzian notions of desire to my own project, I found the conviction to push forward my view that children and researchers can work together in more playful and experimental ways than is usually expected, as indicated by my approach in Study Two, where I implemented "Ideas Club"; a space where children might be able to pursue their desires, in the positive, productive and 'power-full' way that Deleuze described. I hoped this approach would upend the usual adult/child power dichotomy, and demonstrate my confidence in children's ideas to create new forms of power. Consequently, I have also decided to use Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) political theory to establish my work as 'micropolitical'. As I see it, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) preference for micropolitics underlines the importance of research projects such as this, which thrive on using small-scale creative action to unhinge the

established practices of schools and, in this case, to help disrupt dominant forces of power relating to ‘school readiness’.

Adding my own layers of understanding to the term ‘power-full’ has become a focus of this discussion, and in Meek’s (1988, p. 18-19) book ‘How Texts Teach What Readers Learn’ I found another playful account of children’s ‘power-fullness’, which relates to children’s ‘knowing’ interaction with fantastical stories and parody:

“Children quickly learn the rules for ‘how things work around here’. Having done so, in behaviour and language, they know what rules can be broken, by parody for example. There are alternative versions of nursery rhymes, Christmas carols, national hymns, which never find their way into books, all of which show that when they have learned the rules, children know how to subvert them.”

As Meek (1988) further elaborates, children enjoy the ‘security of the familiar’ and the ‘shock of novelty’. They can sense the reality, but also the ‘daring possibilities’ of stories which can feel real too, and they learn ‘hidden’ lessons that can never be found in a reading scheme or worksheet (Meek, 1988). Using the term ‘knowingness’, Meek (1988) also suggests that children can find confidence when they understand the subtleties of texts - subtleties that are placed there by skilled authors, who expect children to ‘get’ the surreptitious references that lie beyond the page. This ‘knowingness’ offered by an author’s narrative enterprise therefore ‘becomes a great power’ for young children, as it allows them to feel a part of the making of the text (Lewis, 1998). To expound this way of thinking, I want to use the term ‘knowingness’ to emphasise that

children have a strong defence against the rigid power of institutional spaces. They can rewrite reality as they 'read' it so long as they have powerful allies who can help them to do so. This is why I chose to invite Reception children (in Study One), to draw their 'perfect classroom', as it presented as an opportunity to capture children's knowingness, and their playful ability to innovate and imagine the world differently.

Intelligent Children

"…our problem isn't proving that all intelligence is equal. It's seeing what can be done under that supposition." (Ranciére, 1991, p. 3)

So far I have emphasised how particular philosophical concepts can be used to critique the notion of voice and to illuminate children's power. I have also used these concepts practically to experiment with the way adults and children can work together in research. I am now keen to explore the possibilities of using a philosophy that insists on assuming individuals' intelligence, by mobilising an alternative logic of emancipation - the political and educational philosophy of Ranciére (1991). Firstly, it is useful to consider emancipation in the traditional sense, because research with children is often described as emancipatory. A conventional model of emancipatory research could be read as an attempt to empower children, and to acknowledge the validity of children's opinions. Hence, this model is usually underpinned by the view that children are a marginalised group. The process of emancipation underlies much of Freire's (1968) theory in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', a text in which he foregrounds the possibility of an emancipatory education. Such a theory

assumes that traditional education is an inherently oppressive system, as expounded by Freire's criticism of the explicative methods used by teachers, which result in children becoming reliant on teachers' knowledge. It is here that Freire's (1968) concerns align with some of my own unease about the current UK education system, as I would argue that knowledge continues to be transferred from teacher to child in a similar explicative manner, which leads to a diminishing of children's intelligence. Hopefully, this statement indicates how a Freirian lens has helped me to reflect on educational policies and structures, and ways in which they need transforming.

Despite the usefulness of Freire's (1968) theory for reflecting on our current UK education system, I am very keen to move beyond traditional 'oppressor-oppressed' accounts of emancipation to consider the possibilities of 'voice' research, when we assume children are of equal intelligence to adults. This premise is based on Ranciére's (1991) alternative logic of emancipation, which he wrote about in his seminal text, 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster'. Ranciére (1991) wrote of this logic as part of his broader critique of society, in which he described schooling as a particular practice where children are conditioned to supplement the existing order of things, perhaps as is inherent in the 'school readiness' agenda. To reshape this system, Ranciére (1991) conceptualised the process of emancipation as the will to act on the assumption that all people's intelligences are equal. This alternative account of emancipation has encouraged me to act using a similar will, to see what can be achieved in research, under this same assumption. For Study One this meant I approached the topic of 'school readiness' with children in a more direct way, than first

intended. For Study Two, I drew on Ranciére's logic to design a playful research space, hoping to rouse and capture Reception children's intellectual powers. By naming the club 'Ideas Club' I also wanted to encourage children to pay attention to their intelligence, and the ideas of others. In keeping with this logic I will consider how the 'school readiness' agenda undermines children's intelligence later in this chapter.

The ideas of theorists Foucault (1982), Deleuze (1994), Ranciére (1991) and other authors (e.g. Sellers, 2013) have been helpful for conceptualising the complexities of power relations in the context of this project. For example, it is not my intention to frame this research in empowering terms as 'giving power' or 'giving voice' to children, as other authors have articulated (e.g. Grover, 2004). This is because I have come to think of power as already inscribed in and used by children. Instead, I am keen to mobilise the concept of a 'fragmented' research space where power relations are uncertain, changeable and context specific (Holt, 2004; Rose, 1997). Also, by thinking of power as the force to affect and to be affected, I have felt encouraged to analyse my intra-actions with children in new ways, such as to look for moments of children's 'power-fullness' and 'knowingness', and also to look for examples where I tried to assert my own power in the research process. I hope that the stories I include elsewhere highlight the messy, complex nature of the participation process (Gallagher, 2008a) and the way children have their own ways of exercising power within research relations and school spaces.

Authenticity

The idea that ‘voice’ research can be used to achieve greater ‘authenticity’ in research is alluded to in the following excerpt:

“Authentic research is operationalized in this article as that research which gives power and voice to child research participants and which provides insights into their subjective world” (Grover, 2004, p. 81).

However, the preoccupation with children’s voices and the demand for authenticity has been challenged by many critiques in literature about voice. From within this literature, I have been particularly influenced by the work of MacLure, who has written (2008; 2009; 2013) about the ‘troublesome’ emergence of voice in qualitative research, and of the ‘broken’ voices with which people speak. By this, MacLure (2009) meant that qualitative research tends to value ‘voice’ as innocent or authentic, without acknowledging what gets lost during the process of translating speech into writing. Like researchers before her, MacLure (2009) used the writings of Derrida (1976) to support her view, and to stress that both voice and writing are insufficient in delivering the ‘fullness’ of a subject’s presence. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the children’s voices in this project cannot be ‘heard’ in a full or authentic sense because many of the spoken qualities that children’s voices carry, such as their silence, laughter and inconsistencies, cannot be captured sufficiently in this writing.

My own concerns relating to the authenticity of voice first appeared during the design of Study One. This is when I began to think about how the children’s

voices might contain ‘echoes’ of other people’s voices, such as school staff. I also came to work on the assumption that the spoken words of children might be ‘coloured’ by the discourses that circulate within children’s school milieu, including those that related to ‘school readiness’. Returning to this idea now, the work of Mazzei and Jackson (2009, 2012) is a useful source for taking this discussion further, given the way they have used post-structuralism to critique interpretive approaches that have linked ‘voice’ with the ‘true and the real’. It is their view that their critique serves as an antithesis to popular ‘evidence-based’ forms of research, which try to make sense of voice by coding it and categorising in ways that count as evidence (Mazzei and Jackson, 2009). Likewise, I have consciously resisted using children’s voices as an evidence base of ‘what works’ in terms of ‘school readiness’ by moving away from interpretation and taking a diffractive approach to analysis – the goal of which is to open up analysis from a variety of perspectives (Chorney, 2014).

Given my interest in the concepts of Deleuze, it is useful to note that Mazzei and Jackson (2012) (and Mazzei, 2010) have also used the Deleuzian concept of the ‘image’ of the speech-act in cinema to bolster their challenge of overly simplistic approaches to voice research. The ‘speech-act’ concept can be found in Deleuze’s study (1983, 1985) of cinematic sound - sound which when first conceived, brought with it a ‘continuum’ of off-screen noises, including music and sound effects, to create another dimension of the visual image. Deleuze referred to these sounds, not seen in the visual component of the film, as an out-of-field voice (Mazzei, 2010). In applying these ideas to voice research, Mazzei and Jackson (2012) pointed to the potential presence of ‘forceful’ noises

outside the frame of spoken words, which might work to guide and constrain participants (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012), noises that are not necessarily 'heard' by researchers because they become too absorbed by the spoken sounds of the speaking subject (Mazzei, 2010). As an example, Mazzei and Jackson (2012) explained that the discursive fields of patriarchy and Southern Baptist religion spoke silently but forcefully in their discussions with teachers about race, which meant the teachers positioned themselves among various subject positions as they spoke. Different versions of the truth were produced; complicated voices were always present (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012). The task then is for researchers not to look for meaning, but to try to allow these multiple truths to be a part of the data that we listen to.

To use Deleuze's study of cinematic sound in a similar way is to draw attention to the possibility that discourses, which circulate within schools, speak silently and unknowingly in the excerpts of children's words presented in this thesis. On this issue, the cinematic terms 'diegetic sound' and 'non-diegetic sound' offer a useful way of thinking. If diegetic sounds are sounds that we can see as they happen on screen, then children's spoken words could be classified accordingly. Equally, if non-diegetic sounds refer to sounds that are neither visible on the screen nor implied in the action, such as background music, we need to consider the possible effects of these types of noises on the overall 'image' of the children's voices. Ominously, non-diegetic sounds are also only audible to the audience, not the characters. Therefore how do we know what children 'hear' or process consciously in the milieu of school, and what they do not? Here belies an added complication to notions of truth and authenticity in

voice research.

As an early career researcher wanting to engage Reception children in a project about 'school readiness', I did not initially identify the complexity of the process of capturing children's voices. It was only after Study One that I began to see the messy, multi-layered nature of this process, and to question the overall value of using the concept of voice in my approach, including how such an ideal might be constraining (Mazzei, 2010). This is partly why, during Study Two, I chose to reread children's voices using the notion of 'ideas'. With Deleuze, ideas are considered immanent, differential and undetermined. Ideas are also 'fleeting states' that generate thinking, but are in no way objects of knowledge or identifiable thoughts to be rationally reflected upon (Snir, 2017). We can only ever sense ideas or know them partially, as they are expressed (Williams, 2008). Focusing on ideas in this way meant I stopped trying to make meaning based on children as singular subjects and instead tried to create a playful, material space for children's ideas to emerge and develop, trusting that these ideas would provoke new thought about 'school readiness'. While this approach could be seen as a creative attempt to pluralise voice, it was motivated more so by the idea that reliable representation is not possible (I'Anson, 2013). Decoupling voice from a rational humanist subject, as I endeavoured to do during Study Two also had significant implications for working with data, as it did not feel just to try to make easy sense of children's spoken words. This is when the 'plugging into theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013) became most valuable, and when I came to see just how far 'voice', when viewed through a post-humanist lens, can be understood to exceed the individual:

"...we decouple voice – words spoken and words written in transcripts – from an intentional, agentic humanist subject and move to VwO (voice without organs), voice thought as an assemblage, a complex network of human and nonhuman agents that exceeds the traditional notion of the individual." (Mazzei, 2013, p. 734)

This point hints at the way I came to read the children's ideas through various theoretical lenses during the analysis process.

In keeping with previous sections of writing, I am keen to use one slightly unorthodox source to conclude this section. This source comes in the form of a critical study by Rose (1984). Rose's (1984) book 'The Impossibility of Children's Literature' contests the assumption that children's books are written for the child. Instead, Rose (1984) makes the claim that children's fiction configures a world in which the adult as the author comes before the child, who is the reader and receiver. As such, Rose's critique raises many questions about the purpose of children's literature, such as who is it really for and whose needs does it actually meet? After considering Rose's (1984) theories, I would argue that there is also something impossible about children's voice research, in the sense that the researcher's motivations primarily come before the child's, even when it is the child's circumstances they interested in. However, I would also suggest that the research process is a much more collaborative practice than the authorship of a children's book, and that children are not passive 'readers' in this process. I would argue that children's voice research does

become possible, when we use children's intelligence as a starting point for actively encouraging them to produce new meanings of our world, at the same time as accepting that there are a great many limitations to using 'voice' as an approach to research.

Children's Play

Theoretical work relating to play is important to this project for several reasons. Firstly, this research in part critically reflects on the position of play in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2017) and in the Year 1 National Curriculum (DfE, 2014), in relation to 'school readiness'. Secondly, ideas relating to play and children's interests arose as a matter of interest during the analysis of Study One data. Study Two was also designed with the intention of creating a playful research space. Therefore this research examines children's playful activity during Study Two. Within this chapter, the theories of two influential play theorists, Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1978), will be discussed and critiqued. This discussion also points to the influence of post-structuralism, and the theories of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), in shaping my own framework of play.

Defining play is not a straightforward task, as exemplified by the volume of discussions that exist in relation to the study of play. Cohen (2006) suggested that play is such a wide behaviour that it cannot be pinned down to one definition. Similarly, Sutton-Smith (2009) connected the ambiguity of play to the numerous ways that play has been studied across various research disciplines, a discussion that linked anthropologists to the study of ritual and play, and

connected sociologists to the examination of play in the social system. To bring coherence to the ambiguity of play, some writers have listed various play forms such as in Hughes' (2013) 'playtypes' taxonomy. While others, such as Sutton-Smith (2009), have studied popular rhetorics and values that underlie play theories. This particular discussion has helped me to move past the ambiguity posed by the volume of play literature. Sutton-Smith's (2009) challenge of the 'play as progress' rhetoric is also pertinent, given my aim to use children's ideas to 'trouble' developmental truths associated with 'school readiness'.

Children's play is commonly associated with cognitive development, as a result of the work of stage theorist Piaget. Piaget (1951) acknowledged the phenomenon of play as difficult to understand, however by systematically observing his own children, he drew links between play and the developing structure of a child's thought. To illustrate these links, Piaget (1951) conceived a detailed four-stage model of cognitive development, which placed children's sensory-motor activity and their operational thought at opposite ends of a continuum. Piaget (1951) proposed a similar biological continuity in the development of children's play, with children progressing towards distinct play forms through processes of assimilation and accommodation. In summary, Piaget (1951) stated that play helps the child to develop their cognition and to understand their actions.

The popularity and continued influence of Piaget's model (1951) has been widely acknowledged. Authors such as Burman (2016) have offered an account of this popularity, suggesting that the model was originally seen to address

questions about the nature of thought, and to provide a timely antithesis to behaviourism's 'empty vessel' theory. Burman (2016) also acknowledged Piaget's efforts to combine various disciplines throughout his study of child development. However, the overall tone of Burman's (2016) analysis is notably critical, particularly in her concern for the selective uptake of Piagetian ideas in Western society. In a similar analysis, Sutton-Smith (2007) suggested that the promise of 'predictable regularities' has been central to the appeal of Piagetian theory. This comment hints at the type of criticism that has been levelled at Piaget's work.

Critical questions about Piaget's approach, and the influence of his work, have emerged in other forms. It is significant that some authors have questioned the contrived nature of Piaget's experimental research methodology (Donaldson, 1978). This experimental research practice is thought to have led researchers to use narrow, individualistic conceptualisations of play and to carry out oversimplified forms of research (Nicolopoulou, 1999). Linked to this idea, Piaget's work has also been criticised for not accounting for cultural and social influences in human development (Nicolopoulou, 1999; Matusov & Hayes, 2000). Much of this criticism has come from researchers following a Vygotskian approach, who have studied children's play and cognitive development using a sociocultural framework (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky are commonly compared and contrasted using this dualism between the individual, and the social nature of play.

Vygotsky is considered to be another of the most highly influential theorists to have shaped the study of play. By taking a socio-cultural approach, Vygtosky (1978) incorporated the importance of social interactions and a co-constructed knowledge base to the theory of cognitive development. Included in his sociocultural theory, Vygtosky (1978) described an approach known as the 'zone of proximal development', which emphasised the role of more knowledgeable peers and adults in stimulating children's development. In this discussion, Vygotsky (1978) suggested that play itself creates a 'zone of proximal development', which allows the child to behave 'beyond his average age' (p. 102). While Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach is considered to have emerged as a timely alternative to Piaget's exacting model of cognitive development, Matusov & Hayes (2000) emphasised the many similarities that exist between the theories of Piaget, and Vygotsky. Sutton-Smith (2009) also hinted at these similarities in negative terms, suggesting that both theorists emphasised the cognitive-developmental value of play, and thus contributed to the 'play as progress' rhetoric. In education, a developmental discourse can frame how educators think about children, and how they practise being an educator. Play is also seen as an important context for learning and development, as indicated in early years legislation: "Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others" (EYFS, 2017, p. 9).

So far this discussion has indicated that 'play' is a highly ambiguous concept. It has also pointed out that Piaget and Vygotsky were highly influential child development psychologists. However, their work and influence has also been

subject to much criticism. These critical responses are relevant to this project, given my aim to move beyond developmental accounts of play. I would also suggest that Piagetian and Vygotskian inspired theories have positioned 'school readiness' as a developmental phenomenon rather than a political one, which has obscured educators' capacity to see play and children differently. Thus, I do not wish to classify play based on pre-determined types, or to establish a link between children's play and their cognitive development, and other specific outcomes. Instead, I will assume a much broader view of play, to capture the multiplicity of play and to acknowledge the diverse ways in which play has been discussed and enacted during this research project; such as the way children captured play in their 'perfect' classroom drawings during Study One, and in the episodes of children's clay experimentation which occurred in Study Two.

In relation to play, I have been keen to explore the new and the different, which has involved bringing post-structuralist philosophy to bear on play. This is because post-structuralist concepts can help us to ask questions of play, to examine play in different ways (Fleer, 2017), and to create 'new maps for old terrain' (Blaise, 2010). In the following section I describe how theoretical ideas relating to post-structuralism and Deleuze have helped me to see more clearly children's power in their play, and to deconstruct certain 'truths' and assumptions that are associated with the Westernised view of play enacted in the EYFS (DfE, 2017). I also hope to elucidate how contemporary play research has formed an important part of my critique of 'school readiness', and has

allowed me to connect creatively with using play within the methodology of my second study.

Regulated Play

"It is easy to accept that play is vital to early childhood education (…) it is also important to be vigilant about the circumstances and discourses through which play's vital place has been produced." (Ailwood, 2003, p. 297)

To start, I will offer a brief discussion of the rhetoric of play in early years policy and practice, the purpose of which is to indicate my scepticism for the reductive out-come driven version of play enacted in the UK's EYFS (DfE, 2017). As part of this discussion, I would like to use Ailwood's (2003) study of governmentality, to offer the view that play has become an over-classified 'heterogeneous bundle of ideas' used for governing children and adults in early years education. This 'bundle of ideas' refers to the functional language and knowledge that has been created by central government to rationalise what play should 'look like' in early years education, thus providing a regulated framework for practice (Ailwood, 2003). Examples of this type of language can be found in the EYFS (2017) and includes words such as 'purposeful', 'developmentally-appropriate' and 'child-initiated', indicating that UK policy values play in terms of children's development and learning needs. By subjecting play to the critical gaze of Foucault (1977), Ailwood (2003) also pointed out that the systematic timetabled observation of children's play, otherwise coined as 'ongoing assessment', (EYFS, 2017) is central to the way early years education is constructed and

managed. Observations of play are described by the EYFS (DfE, 2017) as useful for ‘shaping’ children’s future learning experiences, implying that adults should assume a considerable measure of control over children’s play choices. Interestingly, even in critiques of ‘school readiness’, play has been described as an important ‘vehicle for learning’ (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011) and as central to children’s preparation for school (PACEY, 2013). Interrogating these reports highlights the domination of the ‘play as learning’ rhetoric, which assumes children’s play as transferable to other kinds of progress (Sutton-Smith, 2009), including children’s ‘school readiness’. Hence, it is easy to see how contemporary play research, which highlights the complex nature of play, could be obscured from view when play is so commonly controlled and regulated by adults for the purpose of achieving specific educational outcomes.

The Power of Play

Previously, I have discussed how children’s desires can be seen as a positive, productive force when we mobilise Deleuzian thinking. These same ideas can also be used to rethink the meaning of play, in a way that challenges current early years practice. Blaise (2010) for example, decided to reread moments of play in her research data using the Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of ‘assemblages of desire’, a concept which Blaise interpreted as the unpredictable flows, movements and intensities in play. For Blaise (2010) if moments of play are understood as assemblages then it is possible to pay more attention to children’s inventiveness and experimentation with others, rather than the outcomes of play. Blaise (2010) argues that this approach can

encourage teachers to see the ‘old terrain’ of early years practice in new ways and to work with children’s desires as they map out new ways of thinking about the world. Usefully, Blaise’s (2010) post-structuralist enquiry of play aligns with my overall aim to ‘map out’ new ways of thinking about ‘school readiness’, where children’s power-fullness and capacity to take control of their play and learning is foregrounded, rather their capacity to meet adult-driven ‘school readiness’ goals.

Linked to Blaise’s (2010) discussion, Lester (2013) provides an interesting way of further critiquing and expanding the rhetoric of play in early years education, using the notion of a ‘Deleuzian playground’. Using this conceptual construction, Lester (2013) draws comparison between configured forms of play on the ‘fixed equipment’ of a playground, with fixed western meanings of play - meanings that segregate play in time and space, and view children’s needs and desires as satisfied by ‘playthings’. For Lester (2013), children’s ‘need’ to play is used by adults as a way of assuming control of over the conditions in which play is allowed. However, as Lester (2013) describes, the conflict here is that play cannot be confined to the fixed or the predictable, when play is recognised as an affective force of change and creativity, such is the case when mobilising Deleuzian concepts. Like Blaise (2010) before, Lester’s (2013) discussion challenges Western play discourse and helps reinforce my view that children’s play cannot be fixed and controlled in the way that the ‘school readiness’ agenda might assume. This more complex view of play also allowed me to connect creatively with using play within the methodology of my second study, including to use an after-school club context to distance my

research study from the type of play that is more commonly associated with Western early years curricula.

There are many other scholars who have highlighted the complex nature of play, some of whom have presented their own unique experiences of children's play to illustrate this view. In one such example, Boldt and Leander (2017) attempted to foreground children's 'enlivening' desires and movements in play, by using Delezue and Guarttari's notion of the 'break' to think through an instance of a young child's Lego play with his father. Here, Boldt and Leander (2017) pointed to the 'wild potential' of Lego to be transformed and to fall apart unexpectedly, thus 'breaking' intentions and producing new movements in play. Through their analysis of this episode, Boldt and Leander (2017) argued that children do not begin with pre-existing narratives and retell them in a linear fashion. Instead, children use improvisational experimentation in their play to transform the past and the future, and to produce movements with and away from the official life of the classroom. It could be argued that Boldt and Leander's discussion (2017) hints once again at young children's power-fullness and the way they often use play to engage with the world in a 'teasing and testing way' (Henricks, 2010) and to negotiate the school milieu in which they are situated. Thus, the ideas in Boldt and Leander's (2017) study are significant for supporting my view that we need to work towards a richer understanding of the complexity of play, so to advocate a greater overall respect for children's power-fullness in the classroom, including in their learning. Their work also highlights the value of using personal experiences of

children's play to find 'breaks in the known', as I have endeavoured to do in my critique of 'school readiness'.

Based on the research presented, it would seem useful that children's 'power-fullness' in play should be more seriously explored within educational research and policy. This shift in thinking would require policy-makers and researchers to acknowledge the complexity of play, and the ways in children use play to actively engage in the formation of their own subjectivities, and to establish agency and power (Wood, 2010). Far from 'docile and industrious workers' (Henricks, 2010) children can steer their learning in ways that do not necessarily align with adult agendas. Consequently, it is naïve to think that adult constructed curriculums (or research agendas) can override children's own preferences in learning, or even their reluctance to learn.

Linking back to Lester's (2013) discussion of play, we could compare early years curricula and the 'school readiness' agenda with the fixed equipment of a playground. While children can be guided towards particular choices, and to use 'equipment' in particular 'developmentally appropriate' ways, children will play and learn, on and away, from the equipment in unpredictable ways. Children have even been shown to create their own secret 'underground' spaces in play, away from adult's gaze (Moore, 2015, Giugni, 2003) thus challenging the assumed right of adults, to govern and regulate children's activity. Perhaps shifting thinking about play, learning and 'school readiness' also requires us to use new, unorthodox imagery of children, as Borgnon (2007) did by offering us the image of a learning pre-school child as a surfer – an

approach inspired by Deleuze's notion of 're-territorialization'; the troubling of traditional images of thought. Borgnon (2007) claimed that this particular image could yield new associations and connections because there are no pre-determined, desirable phases of development for the child as a surfer, like there are for the learning child or the playing child, as produced by development psychology. For me, offering new imagery of the child in play, and in learning offers a powerful way of expanding narrow conceptions of 'school readiness'.

A final word on being playful

Is there a difference between play and playfulness? According to Sicart (2014) there is:

"The main difference between play and playfulness is that play is an activity, while playfulness is an attitude (…) an attitude is a stance towards an activity – a psychological, physical and emotional perspective we take on activities, people, and objects." (p. 22)

I like the idea that being playful is different to play, yet matters just as much as (Sicart, 2014). I like the idea that being playful means projecting the characteristics of play onto non-play activities (Sicart, 2014). For Sicart (2014) this means playfulness can be used for disruption and to help us see situations differently. Playfulness can also allow the world to become less formalised and more ambiguous (Sicart, 2014), merits that appear to align well some of the

theoretical ideas presented in this chapter. Post-structuralist ideas for example have encouraged me to be playful with the way knowledge is produced, to move outside the boundaries of what is known, to be playful with a concept that is fixed with ideals. Likewise, Deleuze's playful theorising has influenced my approach because his concepts affirm the enormous potential of the 'virtual' – "the immense reservoir of potential meanings that are always already immanently" (Krejsler, 2016, p. 1). It has also been suggested that Deleuzian approaches are particularly fruitful for encouraging playfulness in schools where routine, uniformity and pre-organised expectations can limit what people see and do:

"Much thinking and working within the conceptual constraints of the dominant school machine tend to make us continuously reproduce rituals that often do not joyfully appreciate the potentiality of other possible entanglements, that is, the potentials that are immanently there in the cracks, hopes, and dreams among the kids, the outside worlds and the worlds within as virtual non-actualized…" (Krejsler, 2016, p. 2)

This is not to say that we need to change and be playful with all school practices all at once for there are many practices in schools that give us a much-needed sense of stability (Krejsler, 2016). However, there are also times when aspects of our lives do not sit well, where we question the structures of which we are a part, and it is in these moments that we should try to open ourselves up to the virtual (Krejsler, 2016). I guess this is what happened when I began to feel uneasy about the 'school readiness' agenda. I stepped away from the

classroom in an attempt to see education anew. Though it was only when I spent time connecting with theory that I understood what opening myself up to the virtual really meant, and just how far it would allow me to 'joyfully appreciate' the 'cracks, hopes and dreams' (Krejsler, 2016) that exist among children.

This purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate an understanding of the topic of 'school readiness' and what the key issues are. The ideas included hopefully justify my particular approach to the topic and demonstrate why 'school readiness' remains a highly pertinent area of research. A second aim of this chapter was to plug my critique of 'school readiness' and my work with children into various theoretical ideas. This meant having to explore my perceptions relating voice, truth, and meaning, as advised by Jackson and Mazzei (2012). In the next chapter I hope to further demonstrate how plugging into theory impacted my practice in the field and the approach to analysis that I took. It is perhaps unusual to not go into depth as this point about the way my 'theoretical framework' expanded during analysis to include ideas from the fields of New Materialism, Post-humanism and more specifically from Barad (2007). My decision to hold this discussion back until Chapter 4 is to be true to the children's ideas and the way they prompted new unexpected pathways in my thinking during the analysis process. To work in an emergent way like this, to leave 'zones of indetermination' (Rajchman, 2000), might well be closer to Deleuze's own approach to writing.

"I've had ideas since before I was born"

While it might be unconventional to offer a piece of data at this point in a thesis,

it feels important to acknowledge that my work with the notion of 'ideas' was also inspired by a surprise, happenchance encounter with a Reception child during Study One. There was no voice or video recorder present in this encounter therefore I had to rely on taking notes immediately after the conversation. These notes were then developed into a narrative later in the day, to capture a little more of the context in which the words emerged. Having been 'affected' by the words of the child I knew I would want to revisit the encounter later in my project:

*I had just finished talking with a group of children about their perfect classroom drawings so I made my way back into the classroom to see what the rest of the children were up to. This was by far my favourite part of being back in schools – getting to know groups of children in a whole new way. Listening to the children felt different compared to when I was a teacher. It felt a lot more genuine. I noticed one of the children drawing at the table. I'd noticed that she spend a lot of time here. I sat next to her for a while, watching her draw. I was just about to ask her a question, when she said this...**"I have to draw things you know… do you know why? It's because I've got so many ideas in my head, I'm scared I might lose them so I have to draw them… and every time I visit somewhere new, I get more ideas… I think I've had ideas since before I was born."***

As implied, the process of relying on memory to capture the child's words is not ideal. The words here exist merely as a trace of what happened (perhaps as all data does). However, I hope this narrative still captures something of the

essence of this encounter and leaves you with your own questions about 'school readiness', for it struck me that these were highly intelligent and power-full words for a young child to share. For this child, ideas appear to exist consciously, perceptively and in abundance in her head. They exist as entities that can be represented on paper. She also indicates new places bring new ideas. While this account does not necessarily align with Deleuze's definition of an idea, where ideas exist beyond the realm of the conscious, I am still drawn to the ability of this child to think in a philosophical, intelligent way - what if ideas do exist before we are born? Surely to think in new and unpredictable ways is what Deleuze encouraged: "To think is to create – there is no other creation – but to create is first of all to engender "thinking" in thought" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 147). I am also drawn to a certain similarity that exists between the child's words and the following page in Yoshitakes' (2015) picture book, a page that reaffirms just how amazing children's ideas are:

Image 5. "There is a world inside my head that nobody can ever get into. I THINK THAT'S AMAZING." (Yoshitake, 2015)

For me, this page also supports a view that children are gatekeepers to their own worlds, in the sense that they can allow or deny adults' participation (Holt, 2004). To consider children as gatekeepers in this way reaffirms the notion that children have their own ways of exercising power during the research process. The complex way in which ideas are perceived and expressed, consciously or not, also stresses the impossibility of ever locating a 'truth' in voice research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

"You should not try to find whether an idea is just or correct. You should look for a completely different idea, elsewhere, in another area so that something passes between the two which is neither in one nor the other." (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, p. 10)

I take the term 'methodology' to mean the methods of knowing (Moses and Knutsen, 2012) or the logic of enquiry (Grix, 2001). Using Deleuze (1994), methodology could also be taken as the conditions under which something new is produced. The purpose of this chapter is to present the main methodological approaches under which something 'new' has been produced, and to describe the ways that Reception children's ideas have helped me to come to know 'school readiness' differently. I also describe the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research, and discuss the scope and limitations of the strategies applied. In the following chapter I will address: (1) the progressive nature of my methodology across two studies, (2) the conventions of qualitative

research and my move towards a ‘post-qualitative’ methodology, (3) the mosaic methods of Study One, (4) the more playful methods of Study Two, (5) my approach to analysis, (6) important ethical moments and (7) my understanding of validity.

The theoretical assumptions underlying this research are drawn in part from qualitative research. This is because my research has employed non-numerical, human-focused methods. However, ‘post-qualitative’ philosophy (St. Pierre, 2013) also forms a part of this methodological framework in light of my engagement with post-structuralism and Deleuzian ontology. A post-qualitative approach implies an ontological belief that the ‘truth’ is not ‘out there’ to be collected, nor can data or words produce a truth. Similarly, Deleuzian ontology is not interested in true knowledge, but the possibility of a world we do not know yet (St. Pierre, 2013). In this way, I have been committed to embracing the uncertainty that comes with qualitative research:

“There are some things that you know to be true, and others that you know to be false; yet, despite this extensive knowledge that you have, there remain many things whose truth or falsity is not known to you. We say that you are uncertain about them. You are uncertain, to varying degrees, about everything in the future; much of the past is hidden from you; and there is a lot of the present about which you do not have full information. Uncertainty is everywhere…” (Lindley, 2006, p. xi*)*

The research strategy adopted was progressive in that I conducted two studies,

approximately one year apart (summer 2016 and summer 2017), with different groups of Reception children in four schools in the North East of England. Within this chapter, these groups are also referred to as ‘assemblages’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). This indicates that a group of children was thought of as a complex, fluid configuration of bodies, forces and ‘things’, each with the creative potential, to create ‘new ways of functioning’ (Livesey, 2005). The aim of an initial study (Study One) was to spend time with groups of Reception children in the last weeks of their early years education. I wanted to talk to them about their experiences and find out about aspects of their lives that ‘mattered’ to them. These discussions were structured using drawing and talk-based ‘mosaic’ activities (Clark and Moss, 2011) as part of a small group approach. The children’s ideas were then used as inspiration for the design of a second study (Study Two), ‘Ideas Club’. Ideas Club became an emergent, playful research space in which I spent time with 3 small groups of Reception children (n: 8-10) from three North East schools for an hour a week, for a four-week period. Within this second study I paid particular attention to the idea that the body, and its connections with the material world, should be valued as a research tool (Woodyer, 2008; Clark, 2011) and so I used picture books and play materials such as clay to engage children in open-ended exploration and conversation. While children participated in some pre-planned activities, I also endeavoured to imbue in my approach a certain degree of ‘slowness’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and flexibility, understanding that knowledge about ‘school readiness’ was not out there to be uncovered but would likely be generated by the group in unexpected ways during our sessions. The emphasis on the body and the physical in Study Two’s approach was a conscious attempt to use the

theory of Deleuze and Guattari to develop more open, playful methods.

It is worth emphasising in this introduction that the development of my first study occurred at a time when I was still trying to shore up a theoretical framework - a concept I have since problematised. Without theory as a guide, Study One was influenced by the methodologies of other researchers, and the rather naïve idea that Reception children would provide comprehensive answers to my questions about 'school readiness'. In contrast, I have come to appreciate that research is a messy process that produces many indeterminate versions of the 'truth', as perceived during Study One, when multiple, co-existing meanings associated with the concept of 'school readiness' were produced by the children. These experiences steered me in the direction of post-structuralist theory to develop a methodology for Study Two, which acknowledged the indeterminate nature of knowledge and truth. Consequently, this chapter is structured in a way that elucidates the journey I have been on in terms of my methodology and the changes that occurred between Study One and Study Two. Throughout this chapter I will also foreground my role in the research process and my experiences as a 'becoming researcher'.

Developing a Methodology

In early childhood research, multi-method approaches such as the 'mosaic approach' (Clark and Moss, 2011) are popular for listening to young children's perspectives. However, there appears to be a developing interest in diversifying listening approaches, including using children's own playfulness and creativity to support multiple expressions of voice (e.g. Blaisdell *et al*., 2018). Similarly,

there have been previous calls for researchers to move beyond method (Law, 2004) and engage in ‘messy methodologies’, which value complexity over certainty and create playful spaces for children and researchers to operate in ambiguous ways (Rautio, 2013). With this context in mind, I will detail the development of my methodology across Study One and Study Two, which saw me diversify my approach to listening to young children. Themes relating to post-structuralism and post-qualitative inquiry, such as ‘slowness’ and ‘overspills’, are used to frame the progression I undertook and to indicate how theory influenced my approach.

Qualitative Research

At the outset of this journey, I was keen to pursue a qualitative, interpretative approach. A research project can be considered qualitative if it is ‘people-focused’ and tries to find meaning in people’s views and values; it can be considered interpretative if it recognises that there will be some subjectivity on the part of the researcher and participants (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) summarised the principles of qualitative research in similar terms:

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world.” (p.3)

A qualitative approach to ‘knowledge construction’ was therefore seen as an appropriate means of investigation, given the human nature of education and

my aim to shed light on ‘school readiness’ by exploring children’s feelings and personal responses. Rather than formulate a concrete plan, I also wanted to assume an open-ended approach that allowed for the research to evolve over time across more than one study. This kind of fluidity and dynamism in approach is aligned more successfully to qualitative research methodology (Lichtman, 2002) and has characteristics of Parlett and Hamilton’s (1985) qualitative, illuminative approach to evaluation; a model that was originally developed as an alternative to quantitative curricula evaluation. Broadly speaking qualitative research is underpinned by the idea that researchers can construct knowledge by engaging with participants from the social world. Nevertheless, qualitative research is a complex field of interconnected concepts, ideas and assumptions, and it has no theory that is distinctly its own (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As such, there is a range of epistemologies that qualitative researchers can draw on in their vision of how research should be conducted. Using the post-structuralist framework described in the last chapter and the scholarship of the post-qualitative field, I will now describe why qualitative inquiry came to take on new meaning in this project, as illustrated by the shift that occurred in my approach between Study One and Study Two.

Post-Qualitative Research

“Qualitative inquiry might stop looking for depth and hoping for height. It might work instead with, and within, the flat topology of events…” (MacLure, 2013, p. 665)

In recent times, elements of traditional qualitative research have been undone by new waves of ontological and epistemological theorising. Amongst those rejecting qualitative traditions are researchers who are linked to postmodern and post-structural sensibilities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008), and out of these dialogues, the notion of 'post-qualitative' methodology has emerged. To give an example of 'post-qualitative' theorising it is useful to draw on the work of St. Pierre (2011, 2013), whose discussion is indicative of recent criticism aimed at qualitative research. St. Pierre (2013) argued that some qualitative researchers use both interpretive/hermeneutic and positivist/empiricist structures to bring regularity to the analysis and presentation of data - an approach, she argues, that assumes meaning exists in the data ahead of its interpretation (St. Pierre, 2013). To unsettle 'conventional' qualitative research, St. Pierre (2013) mobilised Deleuzian ontology to argue that the world cannot be gathered together, organised and described using a given, pre-existing meaning. Thus, researchers who espouse this more radical stance tend not to think with the concept of 'data' at all, accepting that there are possibilities in the world that haven't been thought up yet (St. Pierre, 2013). MacLure (2013, p. 660) expressed a similar view of 'data' when she wrote, "We are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us." Consequently, at the heart of the post-qualitative philosophy appears a desire for researchers to use a more experimental approach (St. Pierre, 2011, 2013), and to treat data with greater fluidity than is usually expected. Authors using this framework (e.g. Davies, 2010) have also questioned the centrality of the human subject in qualitative research, the implications of which are explored later in this chapter.

Following St. Pierre's (2011, 2013) expressions of caution about qualitative research, it is useful to point to the prominence of evidence-informed practice in education in England and the perceived need for researchers to provide answers for developing policy and guidance for practitioners (Biesta, 2007). Such demand has subjected qualitative research to criticism of a different nature, from research users such as policy-makers, on the grounds that qualitative research does not always serve evidence-based practice well (Hammersley, 2007; Biesta, 2007). Worrying for some (Biesta, 2007, 2010) is that the emphasis on 'what works' has narrowed the field of educational research to questions and methods of a technical nature, with teachers relying heavily on 'positive' research evidence to develop their practice:

"A key problem with the idea of evidence-based practice is that it simply overlooks the cultural option. It focuses on the production of means for given ends and reduces research questions to the pragmatics of technical efficiency and effectiveness." (Biesta, 2007, p. 19)

Educational researchers are thus faced with working in a climate of accountability, which privileges an instrumental model of social science (St Pierre, 2013). In light of this, it is perhaps easy to see why some researchers look to conduct their studies in more systematic and scientific ways compared to others, to provide the evidence that is so openly desired. Yet, it is also easy to see why diverse forms of social research have emerged, led by researchers (e.g. Freeman, *et al.*, 2007) who wish to challenge the political drive for

evidence, with the creation of new methodologies. For these researchers (Freeman, *et al.*, 2007; St Pierre, 2011, 2013) the strength of the qualitative research field is in its heterogeneity, and in its close contact with research participants, and these are the standards that guide them:

"Representing the multiple layers of human experience is fraught with challenge, alternative, and limitation. But everything is not, as some argue, "just a matter of opinion," nor is what makes a qualitative study good a simple matter of meeting a checklist of criteria… We hope that our discussion here will be another incitement in the continuing conversations about truth and validity that have always preoccupied qualitative researchers as we struggle to generate epistemologies and methodologies that enable us to grapple with the complex world in which we live and do science." (Freeman, *et al.*, 2007, p. 30)

Certainly, it is useful to acknowledge that quality in qualitative research is perceived in many different ways. For this reason, I want to clarify my view that qualitative research can be both high quality (providing valuable, original and ethical knowledge) and attentive to the complexity of human experience. This is why I have used research methodologies that apprehend notions of evidence and effectiveness, on the assumption that complex research accounts are also very important to the development of educational practice. In this way, my methodological approach serves as an expression of my values about the aims and purposes of educational research; values which appear to align particularly closely with writers such as Biesta (2007, 2010) who have argued for a reconnect with questions of purpose in education.

Post-qualitative research appears to be a growing field as illustrated by the following published works, which share particular commonalities. Honan and Bright (2016) contributed to the field by unsettling the practices of qualitative doctoral thesis writing. In this discussion Honan and Bright (2016) revealed their suspicion that qualitative educational research produces conformist thesis writers – writers who learn what they have to, to construct a text of similar, repeating structure that can be called 'a thesis'. But as Honan and Bright (2016) pointed out thesis writing does not have to be governed by these 'partial', 'temporary' rules; instead it can stretch the boundaries and give rise to new forms of expression. This for me became an exciting invitation in terms of writing up this research. Also thought provoking is the opinion that becoming a post-qualitative researcher is like releasing a caged bird. Kuby *et al*. (2016) used this image of flight to illustrate their experiences studying on a post-structural theory and research methods course. The course led them from thinking with post-structuralism to working with methodologies of post-qualitative inquiry (Kuby *et al*., 2016). As an outcome of their experiences, they experimented with artwork, poetry, font and colour within their manuscripts, a 'transgression' that was inspired by the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari:

"I needed to escape the written word, to begin again, to think with theory and my becomings in different ways (…) I ripped my canvas cage open literally, revealing words written in my narrative inquiry and PS coursework (both with Candace) and poetry I felt best expressed my journey of becoming." '(The words of 'Sarah' in Kuby *et al*., 2016, p. 145)

As such, there appears a commonalty in these examples where the practice and presentation of social inquiry has been challenged, reconceived and infused with greater creativity. Herein lies another reason why this project could be categorised as post-qualitative, given the variety of research methods, and the range of modes used to present this thesis. It is also important to note that post-qualitative inquiry was not a term I was familiar with at the start of my PhD journey. Understandings of this concept emerged partway through the process, as a result of my engagement post-structuralist research.

A Continuum

"At some point, we have to ask whether we have become so attached to our invention – qualitative research – that we have come to think it is real." (Lather and Pierre, 2013, p. 631)

Using the words of Lather and Pierre, (2013) it could be said that the methodology for this project operates 'within and against tradition'. It is a project that has used some aspects of traditional qualitative research, such as the small group 'child-friendly' methods in Study One, but has also used theory to challenge the aims of these methods. Using a different analogy, it could also be said that my research journey has traversed along a qualitative research continuum (Ellingson, 2009), sometimes occupying a 'middle ground' of interpretive enquiry, and of rigor and reflexivity, and sometimes gravitating towards a more creative end, such as when I engaged with more creative

analytical practices. A shift of this nature occurred when I first tried to 'analyse' Study One data, as the thematic processes I was using felt inadequate. I was too focused on trying to work out what the children meant; too interested in how I could relate their comments to 'school readiness'. For this reason, I drew on the ontologies and epistemologies offered by post-structuralism, as I will discuss later in the chapter. This lens offered different theoretical tools and enabled more transgressive ways of working - an approach that could be described as post-qualitative. I came to work under the assumption that data cannot be separated into boxes (St Pierre, 2013), and thus resisted the 'artificial neatness' (Strom *et al*., 2014) of traditional qualitative analysis. Instead, I focused on the 'affective' elements of the children's ideas, and the ideas that sparked new pathways in my thinking. The concept of 'affect' is central to Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy and is mobilised in my analysis as a moment of 'wonder (MacLure, 2013) that transformed my thinking. My 'affective' approach to analysis was also informed by Leander and Rowe's (2006) 'rhizo-analysis', the 'ideas tracing' of Ehret, Hollett and Jocius (2016) and MacLure's (2013) notion of 'potentiality' – the being open to data that 'glows'.

Within this post-qualitative framework, I came to use playful group-based methods as part of a second study, exploring Reception children's ideas in greater depth (Ideas Club). By focusing on children's ideas alone, I wanted to engage with children in ways that resisted the production, measurement and comparison of children as subjects, as is commonplace within educational policy and practice. My attempt to 'de-centre' the human subject in this way aligns with others' efforts to use post-structuralism to challenge the

individualisation of the subject under neoliberal governmentality:

"*The individualised subject under neoliberalism has, in this analysis, reduced agency and reduced capacity to generate new thought*." (Davies, 2010 p. 54)

This is also why I vetoed using qualitative strategies such as case studies, which tend to identify individual children as a unit of analysis because I felt this might inadvertently 'categorise' children in similar ways to the 'school readiness' agenda. By contrast I wanted to use play-based, group methods to foster the collective capacity of children to produce new ideas, and to promote a view of agency that emphasises the power of children's intellect and imagination:

"Agency lies in the capacity to stand back from thought, to see what it assumes and what it might accomplish, and to imagine how it might differ. It lies in the capacity to critically examine thought, and to generate new thought, using not just intellect but also imagination and the senses." (Davies, 2010 p. 67)

In combination, my critique of the aforementioned literature, alongside my own ongoing reflections on the nature of "truth", serve to indicate how the theoretical framework underpinning the project and my own values influenced the methods I developed for Study Two.

Methodological Slowness

"We could and should slow down, and become attentive to what is happening—

now." (Horton and Kraftl, 2006, p. 72)

Linked to my discussion about post-qualitative inquiry, I will now describe how children's geography research has offered another way of contending with the aims of this research project, occasioned by my methodological concern for grappling with what Reception children perceive as important in their everyday lives. Children's geography research has been helpful because it is a field that deals with the everyday spaces and places of children's lives. Also useful is the move by some children's geographers (Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Harker, 2005; Thrift, 2004) to draw from a more contemporary theoretical base, including bearing witness to the ideas of post-structuralism. Horton and Kraftl (2006) suggested that by subscribing to post-structuralist ideas, children's geographers can develop a 'materialised sensibility', and/or a sensibility to children's bodily practices, which could lead to a richer, more complex understanding of the geographies of children. Likewise, they also argued that post-structuralism's multivariate readings of space and time could imbue a 'methodological slowness' in the field, where researchers take their time to detail the ongoing, ever-changing rhythm of children's everyday lives, rather than working in ways that refute the complexity of the world:

"Spaces are never finished, never containers waiting to be filled, never discrete blocks, segments or 'fields'. There are all sorts of complex, contingent and on-going connections that always make spaces (an) under-construction. Children's Geographies are never finished, but may be overdone by excessive attempts to close them down, to represent them, and to focus on the easy bits." (Horton

and Kraftl, 2006, p. 88)

In subsequent sections, I aim to demonstrate how the notion of ‘slow’ research has influenced my methodology and expanded the breadth of my research, to show how ‘school readiness’ policy works to close down the complex and contingent nature of early years spaces.

Useful to the development of my research methodology was a specific example of Horton and Kraftl’s (2006) research in which they chose to contrive a situation to talk about what ‘mattered’ to them as children. Through these vignettes of childhood memories and reveries (including stories of glasses-wearing and being clumsy), Horton and Kraftl (2006) drew attention to the juxtaposition of the banal, yet affective and emotional character of the experiences they discussed. So affective were these experiences, they also described them as having ‘infected’ the ‘ongoingness’ of the their lives, even into adulthood (Horton and Kraftl’s, 2006). And so Horton and Kraftl’s (2006) concluding remarks describe several possible futures for children’s geographies based on their experiences: that the field would benefit from a greater openness to the affective, non-representational nature of children’s lives; that the deployment of non-linear notions of ‘growing up’ require slower, more experimental ways of working; and that describing these ineffable experiences necessitates new styles of writing. How these ideas might converge together became a focus for my own methodological approach.

Horton and Kraftl (2006) were interested in what matters to children as adults;

I was concerned with matters to children as children. Yet common to our wondering was a keenness to capture the 'becoming-ness' of children and the small, mundane, happenchance moments, events and emotions that matter in children's everyday lives. For this reason, I decided I wanted to design research spaces in which children might talk about all or some of these moments and experiences, hopefully related to their past, the present and the 'ongoingness' of their lives. To begin with, I identified that a certain degree of planning was needed to foster these conversations, which is partly why I decided to use semi-structured drawing and talk-based focus groups for the purpose of Study One. I also hoped that the children's conversations, and their responses would far exceed my intentions and planning. Luckily this turned out to be the case, and I came to find out more about the children's lives than I anticipated, both in Study One and in Study Two. Similar to the juxtaposition described by Horton and Kraftl (2006), it was also in some of the children's 'small', 'everyday' remarks, where my thinking about 'school readiness' was most notably changed.

To use a 'slow' methodology is to be guided by a theoretical framework that stresses a commitment to doing research differently. In taking this approach there are several methodological issues to consider. Some of these issues were discussed by Millei and Rautio (2017), who experimented with a 'slow' research approach in their ethnographic exploration of children's place-making in a pre-school home corner, as inspired by Horton and Kraftl's (2006) paper. Firstly, Millei and Rautio (2017) described how new theoretical routes (including using Deleuze) had helped them think differently about their role as

researchers. For example, they realised they were as much a part of the research 'assemblage' as the children. Consequently, Millei and Rautio's (2017) described having to 'rewind' the data, and to narrate events 'anew' in light of their own emotions. This resulted in them using enthno-poetry as a form of non-standard presentation to acknowledge the affective dimension of knowledge production. Millei and Rautio (2017) also described having to revisit data to pay attention to the 'overspills' of their research – the events that they initially regarded as irritants and distracting to their focus. After reinserting these 'overspills' back into the data, Millei and Rautio (2017) recognised the limitations of their original research framework and were able broaden its focus. This, they argued, led to a more complex, layered understanding of the phenomena in question (Millei and Rautio, 2017). Similarly, by replaying video and voice recordings collected during Study One and Study Two, I too reinserted unheard comments and seemingly ill-fitting ideas back into my frame of focus, thus provoking new thinking in relation to my understanding of 'school readiness'.

The influence of theoretically propelled notions such as 'overspill' (Millei and Rautio, 2017) and 'slowness' (Horton and Kraftl, 2006) can be distinguished in the methodology of this project. Perhaps where this influence is most discernible is in the shift in methods from semi-structured focus groups (Study One), to a semi-ethnographic after-school club (Study One) when I was able to spend longer periods of time with the same children over a four-week period. 'Slowing' the process down like this meant I could take more time to listen to the everydayness of children's lives, and to recognise the 'affective capacities'

(Aitken, 2014) of the children's ideas.

Study One Methodology

In the following section I detail the methodological approach I took in Study One. As an overview, Study One used an open-ended approach under the emergent theme of 'school readiness' and took place during the summer term of the academic year 2015/2016 with Reception children (aged 4 and 5). By using a broad, emergent theme, I wanted to untie the research from adult interests, blending open-ended 'school readiness' questions with opportunities for children to contribute their own ideas. For this study, four 'mosaic' activities (inspired by Clark and Moss, 2011) were used. These activities were carried out with different groups of children, as part of a focus group approach. In one activity children were invited to draw their 'perfect classroom'. In another task, classroom photographs were used as stimulus for talking about 'readiness'. Artefacts produced through mosaic methods, such as drawings, were then used as stimuli for conversation with teachers and children. For this reason, Study One can be divided up into four distinct phases, which are described more fully later in this chapter:

Phase 1: Pilot Study in School 1

Phase 2: Main Study in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4

Phase 3: Children's drawings used in discussions with teachers

Phase 4: Children's drawings revisited with original participants

Study One was designed as a ‘preliminary’ study to investigate ‘school readiness’ broadly and uncover significant issues that might warrant further research. It could be said that this strategy has characteristics of Parlett and Hamilton’s (1972) social anthropological paradigm of illuminative evaluation. Exploratory in nature, Parlett and Hamilton’s (1972) illuminative model was introduced as an alternative to ‘artificial’, measurement-focused curricula evaluation, focusing instead on individuals, processes, and the realities of working with new educational programs within complex learning milieus. Parlett and Hamilton (1972) highlight that illuminative evaluation aims to be ‘both adaptable and electric’ and may come in diverse forms, with no one method used exclusively. The structure of Study One, in relation to Study Two, could also be compared to ‘progressive focusing’, an idea taken up by Stake (1981), who urged researchers to use multiple stages of observation and inquiry, to focus on issues gradually, rather than use a single definitive plan. Comparably, it was felt that using several phases of research would allow me to refine and shift my focus in response to the complex realities of ‘school readiness’. Multiple phases included researching with children through mosaic methods, talking with teachers about children’s artefacts, and developing a second more playful study in response to these conversations. Although not fully understood in the early stages of my project, this progressive, illuminative approach helped me to acknowledge the emergent nature of knowledge, and the messiness of qualitative research. However, rather than narrow my research focus in order to explore specific issues, in the way Parlett and Hamilton (1972), and Stake (1981) describe, I would suggest that my project opened out more fully to embrace the unknown. Thus, Study One proved to be a key part of the research

strategy in a way that was unexpected, as it served as a stimulus for developing the more open, playful approach adopted in Study Two. The words of the cricket in Dahl's much-loved book (1961) 'James and the Giant Peach' echo these sentiments:

"There are a whole lot of things in this world of ours you haven't even started wondering about yet" (p. 77)

Image 6. James & the Giant Peach (Dahl, 1961)

Researching with children

A starting point in my Study One journey was drawn from my aspiration to research *with* children. An approach that stands in contrast to conducting research *on* children, where children are seen as objects rather than participants (Mauthner, 1997). My rationale for working with Reception children was explored in Chapter 2 and relates to my experience of teaching in Reception, and my interest in Reception children's transition to Year 1 where there is a shift towards a more formal way of working. I also felt that the voice of the child appeared to be missing from the 'readiness' debate. Therefore I was keen to seek children's participation as a way of making sense of the ambiguity surrounding the concept of 'school readiness'.

Guided by my desire to research with children, the design of a first study began with an exploration of fairly orthodox early childhood methodology literature,

much of which advocates using child-friendly research methods. A recurring theme in these texts is the notion that children are not a single, homogenous group of people (Christensen and Prout, 2002), and that a multi-method, multi-sensory approach is useful for recognising children's broad range of capacities (Crivello *et al*., 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; Lundy *et al.*, 2011; Clark, 2005). As such, I came to understand that my chosen methods needed to be sensitive to the varied strengths of young children. Given this understanding, Study One drew specific influence from Clark and Moss' (2011) mosaic approach, a popular multi-method tool for investigating the lived experiences of young children in education. Other researchers (Gallagher, 2006; Baird, 2013) have described their success in using a mosaic methodology for assuming a 'less traditional', adaptable approach for talking with children about their everyday lives. The mosaic approach has also been described as a 'framework for listening' and a 'strengths-based' model, which respects the expertise and competence of children (Clark and Moss, 2011); principles that appeared to align well with my own starting points for researching with children. However, using mosaic methods has since been a complex endeavour, having grappled with the merits of 'child-friendly' research methods, and notions of embodiment and materiality, as influenced by my engagement with post-structuralist research.

Four practical and talk-based structured activities, used as part of a mosaic approach, came to form the design of Study One. These activities were inspired by the visual and verbal techniques offered specifically in the mosaic approach itself (Clark and Moss, 2011), and various practical methods employed in other

research studies involving children – methods not necessarily used as part of a ‘mosaic’ methodology. The structured activities of Mauthner (1997) and Einarsdóttir’s (2003) studies were a particularly useful insight for planning methods. These studies used drawing, self-complete activities and books to introduce children to research questions about healthy eating (Mauthner, 1997), and artefacts to shed light on children’s perspectives of their early childhood settings (Einarsdóttir, 2003). Both of these researchers perceived that non-verbal and visual forms of expression afforded interesting inlets for investigating children’s day-to-day experiences. It is also useful to note that Einarsdóttir (2003) stressed the importance of listening to children during practical activity, rather than trying to analyse the artefacts they produce. I am very pleased my attention was drawn to this point, as it helped me bring children’s ideas to the fore, in later stages of this project:

“Meanings is not important,” said the BFG. I cannot be right all the time. Quite often I is left instead of right. (Dahl, 1984, p. 34)

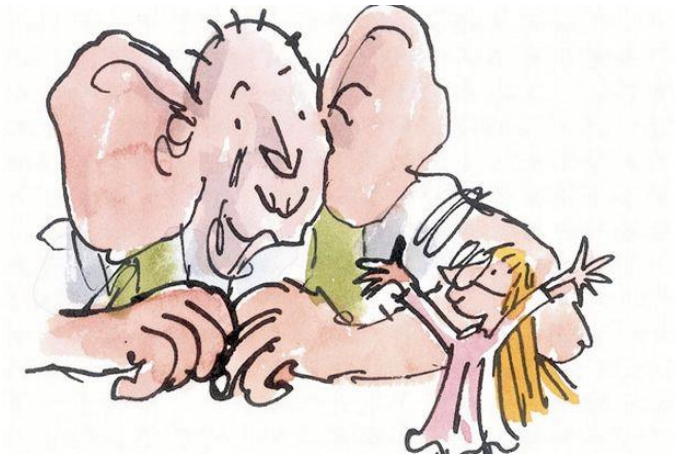


Image 7. The BFG, Roald Dahl

A Materialised Mosaic Approach

Mosaic methods have been linked to notions of multimodality and meaning making, as emphasised in Clark's (2011) discussion of using map-making with young children. This is because the mosaic approach places importance on visual and kinesthetic modes of communication alongside speech, to help play to the strengths of young children (Clark, 2011). The concept of multimodality therefore offers a framework to help make sense of children's various communicative modes, many of which they draw on habitually within the school environment; a site already rich in multi-sensory experiences and multi-modal communication (Clark, 2011). When meaning making is understood as the process of knowledge production, various modes of communication can also help make this process more visible to the researcher (Clark, 2011). This is why Clark (2011) chose to use the term 'map-making' to emphasise that the design process was of more interest to her than the maps themselves. The relevance of Clark's (2011) discussion to my methodology is thus linked to the idea that the multimodal methods of the mosaic approach should be used to *produce* knowledge rather than *gather* knowledge, as I came to understand during my first study, when I realized that knowledge about 'school readiness' was not out there to be found (as I'd first thought) but would be generated by the children throughout each mosaic activity.

The links drawn between mosaic methods and multimodality are also important to the next part of this discussion, in which I aim to highlight the value placed

by some post-structuralist researchers on the embodied and material dimensions of the world, and the research process. This is evident in post-structuralist studies such as Burnett and Merchant's (2017) in which they used 'stacked stories' to evoke the felt, embodied, material intensities of children's meaning-making processes - stories that they hoped would disturb simple models of literacy. Embodiment also formed an important part of Leander and Boldt's (2012) rich description of a child's engagement with a Japanese manga text; an account in which the sensations and movements of the child's body were positioned as significant to the comic reading event. In their discussion, Leander and Boldt (2012) draw heavily from the ontology of Deleuze and Guattari to argue that literacy-related activity is an 'ongoing present' which forms relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in unexpected ways. This is because Deleuzian/Guattarian philosophy is non-representational in nature, and demotes language in a way that makes it unrecognisable and non-interpretative - where 'discourse and matter connect in the mangle' (MacLure, 2013, p. 663). Using these particular examples of research, I want to emphasise that my use of mosaic methods evolved beyond straightforward conceptions of 'child-friendly' research as a result of my engagement with post-structuralist research, and came to link more complicatedly to the idea that the body, and its connections with the material world, should be valued as a research tool (Woodyer, 2008; Clarke, 2011); a view that also became integral to the design of a second study, which took the form of an after-school Ideas Club.

Focus Groups with Children

Focus groups are a widely used qualitative research strategy. They are most commonly used to gather opinions about an issue and usually involve groups of participants with similar characteristics (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Although focus groups were originally developed for research with adults, there has been a considerable rise in the number of research studies that have used focus groups with children, particularly within the fields of health and education (Hennessy and Heary, 2005; Gibson 2007). This is perhaps because focus groups offer versatility and can be made interactive with activities (Gibson, 2007). Given that both Study One and Study Two involved researching with Reception children in small groups, literature relating to focus group methods is considered relevant to this discussion, particularly for Study One where a more structured 'focus group' model was used. At the same time, I am keen to use focus group literature to point out dissimilarities that exist between my study and others'. Some of these dissimilarities relate to the Deleuzian concept of the 'event', which I have used to bring a different meaning to the notion of 'group interaction'. The term focus group is therefore not applied as a neat fit to my approach, but instead offers a useful starting point for a discussion of the methods used in Study One.

Focus group discussions were considered an appropriately flexible format for carrying out mosaic activities with young children for the purpose of Study One. This rationale was based on the broad definition that focus groups are an organised, interactive and dialogic event, used to explore a topic of interest to the researcher, with a nominated group of people (Morgan, 1996; Gibbs, 1997). In Study One the nominated group of people were Reception children, and my

intention was to use the focus groups to deliver a mosaic of activities as a means of fostering children's interactions, and 'sparking' their ideas. Other researchers have also used mosaic methods as part of a focus group approach. For example, Hettitantri and Hadley (2017) used various methods to study young children's experiences of 'connectedness' in post-conflict Sri Lanka, which included integrating child drawings and child-led tours into focus groups. Similarly, in a UK study Gallagher (2008) invited small groups of primary school children to use wooden blocks to make a model of their classroom, as part of a participatory approach exploring children's perceptions of school spaces. Clark and Moss's (2001) own guidance also offers examples of researchers using the mosaic approach at a group level, suggesting that this is a popular format for listening to children.

A range of advantages associated with the use of focus groups with children was considered in the design of Study One. For me, one of the most important of these benefits relates to the idea that focus groups bear resemblance to the small group interactions common to many early years settings (Mauthner, 1997). During my time as a practicing Reception teacher, I regularly worked with groups of 4-6 children to play mathematics games or share a story. I found the main advantage of 'teaching' in small groups was in the flexibility that this approach affords, that is, I could respond with greater sensitivity to individual children given the higher adult to child ratio, compared to whole class methods. I also found that a group context presented a 'safer' environment for discussion, particularly for quieter children. Comparable benefits have been ascribed to focus group methods. Connolly (1995) observed that small group discussions

created a safe peer environment among young children in his study of racism, while Morgan *et al*. (2002) noted the positive response of quieter children to pen and paper exercises, used during their focus group study exploring asthma. Adding to this, each focus group used in Study One was made up of children who already knew each other from their pre-existing class groups, for the reason that they might feel more comfortable during discussion (Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Mayall, 2000; Vaughn *et al*., 1996).

When focus groups are compared to other methods such as the one-to-one interview, the interaction between individuals is considered the distinct advantage. This is not necessarily 'naturalist' interaction, like that often associated with participant observation, but a more controlled 'concentrated set' of interactions facilitated by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). During a focus group, participants might compare their ideas and experiences (Morgan, 1996; Kitzinger, 1995; Kitzinger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2000), revealing consensus and divergence within a group. They might also be provoked to respond to others' opinions, otherwise described as the 'synergistic effect' (Hoppe *et al*., 1995). In this sense, participant interaction is understood to produce a unique and valuable kind of data, not necessarily possible through other methods (Montell, 1999; Gibbs, 2017). Linked to these ideas, I was therefore keen to explore how I could use focus group interaction to engage with Reception children in a way that might transform my thinking about 'school readiness'.

After considering the advantages of group interaction it is also important to grapple with its complexity, including the various roles group interaction can

assume in a focus group study (Belzile and Öberg, 2012). Such variations might relate to the type of research being carried out, as well as the philosophical assumptions of the researcher - that is, whether the researcher sees the participants as individuals with their own held truths, or as social beings who co-construct meaning (Belzile and Öberg, 2012). Group interaction can therefore assume a more, or less meaningful position during the analysis and reporting of findings, depending on how the researcher conceptualises what is going on between individuals in the group. Certainly, my application of post-structuralist ideas altered my use of group interaction in so far as interaction was understood as more than just the hallmark of focus group methodology. Instead, I came to perceive group interaction as a messy process that produces many indeterminate versions of 'truth', as experienced during Study One when multiple, co-existing meanings associated with the concept of 'school readiness' were produced by the children over the course of the study.

At the beginning of Study One I understood that focus group interaction could be useful for 'sparking' children's ideas. However, after 'plugging into theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), I came to understand group interaction in more complex terms, as having an emergent, illogical and felt character. Using the Deleuzian inspired ideas of Massumi (2002), each focus group was therefore re-conceptualised as a unique 'event' of interactions between bodies, objects and ideas, inextricably linked to the process and potential of becoming. Such a view meant admitting that each focus group could not be reproduced, even when 'general conditions', such as using the same mosaic resources, were applied across separate focus group events. This is because the 'interfering charge' of affect (Massumi, 2002) and the complexity of emergence made each

event unique. Such a view is also in keeping with the post-structuralist perspective that meaning is always in flux and that knowledge is only ever partial, and situated to the distinctive time and place in which it occurred:

"In keeping with the theoretical basis of post-structuralism (…) researchers do not claim to be capturing truths, rather they are concerned with how individuals, groups, cultures and institutions construct realities and with what effects. In doing so they also recognise that information collected can be only partial, situated in terms of time and place and the context of the specific situation… (Wright, 2003, p. 42*)*

In complicating accounts of focus group interaction, I have also drawn on the research of Bailey (2017) and his application of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) 'Body without Organs' to present an understanding of interaction as the inseparable relation between the self and the collective. The 'Body without Organs' concept helped Bailey (2017) see the twelve children involved in his Minecraft Club study as a collectivity and as different parts of a single body, creating intensities together, in relation to the Minecraft game – organs in a reconfigured form. Bailey (2017) further described his conviction that the Minecraft group generated intensities together, in a way that gave rise to connections, responses and ideas of a collective nature, spread verbally, emotionally, and through movement. Bailey's (2017) discussion helped me think about focus group interaction in a similar way, in terms of connections and intensities between different parts of the same body (the group). I also want to emphasise that the production of ideas was seen as dependent on interaction

between children, of which the mosaic activities were a part. The implication here is that the children's ideas presented in this thesis are not necessarily ascribed to individuals, but thought of as a 'collective individuation' (Massumi, 2012).

Method of Sampling for Study One

In the lead up to Study One I worked in consultation with a member of a local School Improvement Team to select a purposive sample of four schools in one Local Authority in the North East of England, from which a sample of children was drawn. As part of this process, we looked at individual schools' early years summative data records, and also at the level of Pupil Premium each school received - funding intended to "help disadvantaged pupils of all abilities perform better, and close the gap between them and their peers" (DfE, 2014). By nature of this approach, the final sample comprised of schools in contrasting socio-economic areas and included two schools operating as part of a two-tier system (primary schools) and two schools operating as part of a three-tier system (first schools) – this makes for a unique context, given that most parts of the UK operate using a two-tier system alone. The reason I wanted to include schools in contrasting socio-economic areas was in response to the widely reported effects of socio-economic disadvantage on 'school readiness' (e.g. Kiernan and Mensah, 2009) – findings that I would argue are based on narrow, academic constructions of 'school readiness'. Consequently, these reports tend to focus on what children can't do, rather than what they can, which goes against some of the key values underpinning this project. Of course, 'on paper' there was a considerable achievement gap between the four cohorts of Reception children

involved in Study One, the likes of which correlated somewhat predictably with the schools' indices of deprivation score, which ranged from 2 to 9, with 1 being the lowest score of deprivation. However, this project was not about exploring and explaining these gaps in achievement, but exposing what we miss of Reception children's intelligence and agency when we think about children in these deficit terms. It is also important to highlight that all of the participating schools had a nursery on site, which meant most of the children involved in the study had been in their school setting for nearly two years, part-time in nursery and full time in Reception. Consequently, an aspect of this research is to consider how this integrated structure might impact on children's ideas relating to 'school readiness'.

From within the four chosen schools, I was keen to work with as many consenting children from Reception as possible. Formal teacher assessment of individual children was not used to determine any aspects of the sample process (e.g. for 'readiness' and 'unreadiness'), as was initially considered. This was because of my unease with the assessment process as a whole, which measures children against a "one-size-fits-all standard of readiness for school" (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011). As a result, the sample for Study One came to include 64 Reception children from across the four participating schools, each of whom took part in one focus group activity.

My desire to select a purposive sample of schools was prompted by my reading of qualitative methodology literature (e.g. Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). It allowed me to achieve a diverse sample, which included both boys and girls of various ages

(some aged four and some aged five), in slightly differing geographical locations, and of different ethnicities. However, I have chosen not to foreground this information in the write up of my research, and in the presentation of children's ideas and artefacts (Chapter 4, 5). This is because I do not want readers to use this kind of arbitrary institutional information to find meaning or coherence in children's words or artefacts, as is often the case in interpretative qualitative inquiry. Thus, by not offering a transparent, simplistic context of individual schools, I have tried to challenge the treatment of data, and to focus the readers' gaze on the children's ideas, rather than the subjects themselves, or the normative assumptions that might be associated with particular school contexts. The only setting for which I do provide a more detailed narrative (Appendix 1), is the school at which I worked as a full time teacher, as a way of further illuminating my backstory and the complex ways in which individual schools and children are perceived.

The Pilot Study

During the principal stage of Study One development it was considered beneficial to pilot different mosaic activities to establish how useful they were for talking with different groups of children. By trialling a range of open-ended, and more specific 'readiness' tasks, I hoped to explore the meanings children gave to their presence in Reception and to their transition to Year 1. As a summary, the pilot study helped me shore up the details of four mosaic activities, and make modifications to my purposive grouping approach. Specific practical and methodological issues, which emerged during my pilot work will also be described.

The pilot study was carried out at a state-funded North East first school, a setting I had worked in previously as a teacher (2009-2015). My familiarity with the school was considered to be advantageous for the purpose of piloting, for I had existing, trusting relationships with the early years staff, and a positive rapport with the Reception children. This kind of acquaintance was particularly important given the tight time frame I was working within to complete Study One before the end of the 2015-2016 academic year. My knowledge of the participants would also allow me to work with sensitivity in this early trialling of methods, at a time when the children might only just be starting to think about their move to Year 1. The pilot study took place over five consecutive days, in the month of June 2016.

Before the pilot study began, information and consent forms were been sent out to the parents/carers of all 60 Reception children (two classes) at the pilot site. Within a week, 42 forms had been returned, with signed consent for children's participation. Evidently, my previous employment at the school resulted in positive parental support for the study. This kind of response afforded me the opportunity to work with a large pilot sample of children (20 boys and 16 girls), across 12 tasks. Some of these tasks were very similar in content, but differed in other ways, such as the configuration of the group (e.g. all boys/girls, mixed sex, and number of children), or in their delivery.

During the pilot study I understood that I had to pay special attention to the way I grouped the children for the mosaic activities. Part of this process involved appraising a purposive grouping strategy, like that widely used in qualitative

research. As a start, it was important that the children involved in the Study One pilot were all coming to the end of their time in the early years. This was a homogeneity considered highly relevant to 'school readiness', given the definition proposed by the DfES, (2014), which links 'readiness' to children's transition to Year 1. In light of this homogeneity it was likely that the children involved in the pilot study had some shared experiences and interests. However, during the pilot study, I recognised this was the only homogeneity I wanted to utilise during the main phase of Study One. This was because purposively grouping children based on fixed criteria did not feel right, given the real requirements of the 'school readiness' agenda for all Reception children (regardless of gender, age or otherwise) to achieve one uniform level of attainment. Equally, I became aware that I wanted to embrace the children's differences, rather than use conventional binaries and categories which, using a post-structuralist lens, are seen to organise children's identities (Davies, 2014). Usefully, Deleuze also commended a positive way of thinking about difference, which could be linked to my approach. Deleuze's difference has been described as temporal (Linck, 2008) and 'continuous', and a celebration of the emergent possibility of becoming different (Massey, 2005; Davies, 2010). For Study One I therefore decided I would group children in a loose and unplanned way, on the understanding that differences are complex and temporal, and not static attributes, as is associated with the 'school readiness' agenda:

"The government uses the term 'readiness for school' as a finite construct, implying there should be a fixed standard of physical, intellectual, and social

development that prepares children to meet school requirements and assimilate curriculum, typically embracing specific cognitive and linguistic skills." (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011, p. 4)

During the pilot study I also paid special attention to the size of the group, and observed that smaller groups of four children were better for allowing individual participants to be heard. Where groups had six children, it was sometimes difficult to follow multiple, simultaneous conversations. This was particularly true in the 'perfect classroom' activity where louder, more heated conversation ensued at the same time as inaudible talk between quieter children. 'Whisperings' of this nature can be an indication that the group size was too big (Krueger and Casey, 2014).

Kitzinger (1994) talked at length about the advantages of using pre-existing groups for research, that is, participants who already know each other through various overlapping social circles. The groups of children convened together for the purpose of this pilot study were homogenous in some respects. They were in the same cohort, at the same school and had innumerable and varying connections to each other, which (in agreement with Kitzinger, 1994) were useful and notable during discussion. While some children clearly considered one another to be friends, others interacted in a less familiar way, perhaps relating to each other only as peers or as a result of other associations such as being in the same 'reading group'. During the pilot study, I observed examples of conversation where children 'pooled' their accounts of shared experiences (a process referred by Middleton and Edwards (1990), as 'collective

remembering') and other instances where I was able to infer a little of children's opinions of each other, such as when one participant drew another member of the focus group next to the teacher, because he had been 'naughty.' As discussed, these kinds of interactions were most likely a function of the children's existing school and playground relationships (Hennessy and Heary, 2005) and they served as an interesting, welcome dynamic during conversation. Latterly, I came to use the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming' to grasp the fluidity of the relationships between the children, with emphasis placed on the changeable nature of their relationships.

During piloting, I tried two dissimilar spaces within the school to see where children appeared most at ease. A working Reception classroom was the first and perhaps most obvious choice, given the participants' familiarity and tenure with the space. The school library was chosen as a second research space - a less familiar room, distinct from the classroom, with a contrastingly quieter ambience. In this room there was the option of sitting at a table or using cushions, depending on the nature of the activity and the preference of the children. In summary, the quieter library space prevailed as a more favourable environment for fostering activity and conversation. In the classroom the background noise was distracting for several participants and so it was trickier to approach more sensitive topics. In the library however, many children reported stories in an open, candid way. Some children were even quite audacious in their approach, replying boldly to questions and testing boundaries of behaviour. With reference to the writing of Green and Hart (1999) and Hill (2006), it could be inferred that the children responded in this way

because they were less inclined to ‘transpose’ classroom expectations to the library-based activities, where rules of conversation were much less explicit. In comparison, the classroom felt a more constrained physical and emotional environment, and offered a less viable option for future attempts at video recording. With the results of the pilot study in mind, I negotiated access to similar types of ‘non-classroom’ spaces in all Study One schools. These rooms were familiar to the children, non-communal, and easily accessible to allow children to return safely to the classroom should they wish (Hennessy and Heary, 2005; Gibson, 2007). As a final point, it is useful to acknowledge the idea that no environment is ever neutral, and that all environments will influence participants’ thinking and the production of data (Bland, 2018).

To allow myself the chance to develop confidence in the researcher role, I chose to adopt a fairly relaxed approach to the pilot study. It was partly for this reason that I did not use technology to record the pilot activities. Instead, I used a field notebook and ‘post-its’ to evidence conversations, as well as annotations on children’s drawings. This felt a very natural method of recording, given that this was how I worked as a teacher to collect evidence of children’s understanding. Conversely, I also found that it was not possible to produce suitably comprehensive accounts of conversations using field notes alone, emphasising a future need to use recording equipment. During Study One I would continue to use field-notes in combination with other methods, to document impromptu conversations and observations.

For the purpose of documenting Study One discussions comprehensively, it was necessary to make a choice between using voice and video recording

technology. In making this decision I had to consider the foreseeable effect of both these types of devices on participants talk (Edward and Westgate, 1994; Gibson 2007). At first, voice recording seemed a more practical, less obtrusive option for working with young children. However, during the focus group discussions I noticed a number of interesting paralinguistic behaviours that added emphasis and clarity to children's spoken language. These included examples of a fist thump and eye rolling. As such, it was decided that a video recorder would be a useful, given its potential for studying important aspects of non-verbal communication. Subsequently, to try and offset any possible apprehension from children concerning the videoing process, I made plans to deliver 'taster' sessions, which would be an opportunity for children to handle the equipment and ask questions. Organising this type of 'question and answer' session was a recommendation put forward by Flewitt (2005) who found such sessions to be a useful part of the consent process. This was evidenced by the children's keenness to ask questions about the equipment (Flewitt, 2005). I hoped that the young participants in this study would benefit from an equally open approach in a way that helped them feel relaxed about the presence of a video recorder.

By close of the pilot study, I was confident with my decision to use video recording during Study One. However, I also understood that its actual application would depend on parents and children's consent to be captured in this way. I also realised that it would have been useful to explore some video recording towards the end of my piloting work. As described by Bowman, (1994) an early familiarity with the camera can allow the researcher to anticipate any potential difficulties that might occur during data collection, such as problems

with the quality of the sound. Not ideally so, these would be issues for me to anticipate during Study One.

Study One

Study One began shortly after the pilot study, at a time when the participants were coming to the end of their academic year in Reception. The proximity of this study to the year-end was very important; talk of transition to Year 1 was a discernible feature of classroom conversation between teachers and children, and similar types of 'meet your new teacher' events were taking place in all four of the participating schools. As such, the planned group tasks, appeared to sit 'naturally' as part of the children's daily routine as they made sense of their move to Year 1.

The activities utilised during Study One used a crossover of modes, including drawing, talking and activity. I hoped that by using various methods the children would generate different, yet complementary information, which might be useful as a contribution to debates relating to 'school readiness'. Underpinning each of these methods was observation and listening – to watch and listen to the interaction between children, between children and objects, to notice children's gestures and expressions, and to feel a part of the in-the-moment experience of children's generation of knowledge. These methods were also built on my belief in the intelligence and competency of young children. I will now describe the methods used, relative to each of the group tasks I used during Study One.

Activity 1: My Perfect Classroom (drawing)

What would be in your perfect classroom? Can you draw it?

The children were given a pencil and a sheet of A4 paper in a landscape orientation. After a short introduction, the children were invited to draw their 'perfect classroom'. As the children drew, I tried to be receptive to the drawing process. As suggested by Wright (2007), this did not mean attending to the children's drawing skills, but to the narrative and embodied dimensions of the their experience, as well other aspects that might be linked to their drawing, including intertextual influences such as TV and computer games. As I listened to children describe and interpret their drawings, I noted down some of their comments, which I added as annotations to individuals' drawings after the activity. Sometimes children talked about their drawings in an unprompted way, often contributing a rolling narration. Where children were quieter, I facilitated conversation with open questions such as asking children about features of their classrooms. As such I spent time observing, listening and actively engaging with children during the activity. At the end of the activity, I accepted the drawings with thanks and offered children praise about their classroom. While some children could have continued drawing much longer, I felt I had to draw the session to a close so the children weren't out the classroom too long, and so each session lasted approximately 15-20 minutes.

During the design of the 'perfect classroom' activity I was conscious of wanting to assume the kind of open-endedness that would allow for various 'spontaneous' themes to emerge, possibly relating to children's early years experiences, to their interests, or to children's favourite people, places or

activities. Likewise, I hoped that the open-ended nature of the activity might facilitate some imaginative and creative thought in the sense that children could present their own classroom in a different form according to their interests or draw a new space into existence. I was also interested in the idea that the children's drawings might in some way, 'make the familiar strange' (Mannay, 2010). By this Mannay (2010) was referring to her experience as an insider researcher and the challenges she faced being highly familiar with the participants of her study and the locality in which they lived – this was an issue which also felt pertinent to my research given my familiarity with early years environments as a teacher. Mannay (2010) suggested that visual methods helped her to promote subject-led dialogue and gain insights into aspects of her participants' worlds that lay beyond her prior knowledge of the research setting. Interestingly, Clark (2011) used the phrase 'informant-led' in similar terms to describe the way in which drawing allowed the children in her study to exercise control of the activity. With these ideas in mind, I hoped that the perfect classroom activity would provide understandings beyond my own preconceived (and 'teacherly') ideas of what a classroom is, and could be; understandings which might not be discovered using a more structured question and answer approach.

Activity 2: Got it! Not yet… (drawing)

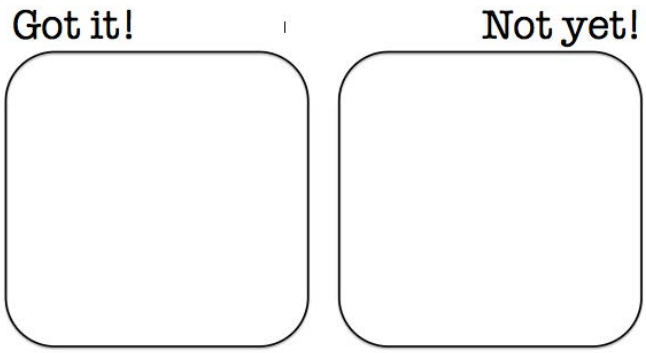


Figure 1. "Got It! Not Yet!" drawing

In this activity, the children were asked to think about something they could do (Got it!) and something they couldn't do yet (Not yet!), and to capture these in drawing form. Emphasis was very much placed on the word *yet* to give the activity a positive feel. I was interested to see which skills, capabilities or aptitudes, children placed importance on and whether any of these related to their school lives.

Echoing Schratz and Walker (1995), and Groundwater-Smith (2014), the use of drawing in this activity (and in the 'perfect classroom' task) was not intended to replace talk. Instead, I wanted to use drawing to create stimuli for conversation between the children and with myself. I also hoped that drawing and talk would interact in the same way that Cox (2005, p.123) described in her study, where drawing was seen as a part of children's broader, intentional, meaning-making activity:

"My observations showed that, rather than filling in what was missing from a drawing, talk and drawing interact with each other as parallel and mutually

transformative processes. Sometimes the talk feeds into the drawing with the verbalised intention being transformed into drawing. Sometimes the drawing feeds into talk: the drawing intention is transformed into talk."

In a similar way to Cox (2005) and the multimodal analyses of Kress (19977), the use of drawing in Study One was underpinned by my view that drawing is a significant mode of expression and communication for children. Thus, my focus during Activity 1 and Activity 2 was on observing drawing as a purposeful process, 'taking place over time and in a specific context' (Cox, 2005), rather than on children's graphic strategies or drawing skills. Focusing drawing as a purposeful process is at odds with developmental stage theories, which often promulgate a deficit view of children's abilities (Cox, 2005).

Others motives for using drawing during Study One included: its flexible and inexpensive character (Literat, 2013); its ability to yield distinctive, personal responses (Schratz and Walker, 1995)'; its ability to allow children to capture areas of their sensory lives (Kendrick and McKay 2004); and perhaps most importantly, its potential to stimulate young children's narrative impulse to create stories (Vygotsky, 1978). However, there are other reported advantages of drawing as a method that I remain a little more tentative about, such as the potential of drawing to authentically capture children's voices:

"Justifications for visual methods, for instance, seem at first convincing. Yet, as a single method they do not overcome the problems associated with representation and remind us about the limits of children's voices. Whether it is

researchers who create images and children are asked to comment on or whether it is children themselves who create them, images are selections produced out of a number of possibilities and, like all other texts, cannot be authentic depictions of social reality." (Spyrou, 2011, p. 4)

Likewise, I have been keen to distance myself from the idea that drawing might be considered a more 'developmentally appropriate' research method for young children (Pyle, 2013) as linked to my suspicion of the value of 'developmentally appropriate' practice in early years settings:

"Space for outcomes that may be different, unexpected, and unpredictable risk becoming squeezed out of such a reductionist framework and the conservative educational climate that produced it (Evans, 2013, p. 179)

Tellingly, a drawing exercise in Elden's (2012) study promoted children to develop complex and multi-layered narratives about care. This led Elden (2012) to conclude that drawing methods are a useful way of inviting mess and multidimensionality into the research process. The complex and ambiguous narratives that emerged in Study One during the 'perfect classroom' drawing task align with Elden's (2012) findings.

Activity 3: Picture Prompts (photographs)

As well using open-ended activities, I was keen to use two further focus group tasks that might address more explicit 'school readiness' questions, including

those concerning children's transition to Year 1. These tasks were more personal and delicate in nature, and therefore required careful thought about content and delivery. For the 'picture prompts' task I laid out several enlarged photographs of familiar and less familiar spaces which I had taken at each of the children's schools. Photographs included the Reception classrooms, the school nursery, and an image of a Year 1 classroom. To begin with I asked the children to work in pairs to identify the school spaces. From there I asked the children to choose two images they'd like to discuss further. I offered the questions *'What can you see?'* And *'what do you think about it?'* to structure children's examination of the photographs. These are the questions offered by Rancière (1987) as those best for 'summoning' children's intelligence.' Inevitably, the photograph of the Year 1 classroom generated the most discussion.

The photographs I took focused on the specific schools spaces I deemed relevant to the 'school readiness' debate in terms of children's transition into more formal education. I had intended the photographs to stimulate conversation about similarities and differences between the classrooms. As an adult interpreting the image, the obvious difference between these classroom spaces was the volume of table and chairs, which was greater in each of the four schools' Year 1 classrooms. I was intrigued to know whether children would also articulate this same difference or whether the photographs would reveal other interpretations, which might contrast with my purposes in creating the photographs. As Cardellini (2017, p. 8) wrote:

"...every child will be carrier of a very own perception that, in a focus group context, could eventually be shared with others, maybe finding differences and similarities."

Thus, divergent interpretations were considered a welcome and likely outcome of the activity linked once again to the notion that the children's opinions might help challenge my preconceived ideas and open up lines for further enquiry:

"…images could lead me where I did not expect and, in this way, configure a fertile ground for further explorations and inquiries." (Meo, 2010, p. 152)

As described, Activity 3 used a set of photographs as stimulus to elicit responses from children as part of the research process. This method could therefore be referred to as 'photo elicitation' (Meo, 2010). Linked to this method, Meo (2010) described the 'open and indexical' nature of a photographic image as being useful for engaging participants without vacillation. Prior research has also revealed the usefulness of the method for providing a conversational focus, and for inviting the emergence of unexpected topics (Pyle, 2013). However, it is worth pointing out that the photographs were researcher-produced (as opposed to participant-produced), an approach which could be seen as having limited the children's contributions (Smith, Duncan, and Marshall, 2005).

Activity 4: Statement for Debate (Talk)

For this activity I presented the children with an envelope with a question mark on it. I then invited one of the children to open it. With my help the children read the statement: *All Reception children feel ready for Year 1.* I then asked the children whether they thought this was true. The phrasing of the statement was deliberately impersonal, so the children didn't necessarily have to talk about whether they felt ready.

Talk-based methods are often considered unfavourable in research with young children, because of the perceived barrier presented by their communication (Pyle, 2013). However, I was keen to avoid working under this assumption so I developed a task that assumed an interminable level of intelligence in the children and afforded them the opportunity to grapple with more exacting 'school readiness' questions, an approach that was inspired by Ranciere's (1987) logic of emancipation. I was also motivated by a lesson I had experienced with Year Three children some weeks earlier as a teacher, in which I had asked pupils to consider a statement concerning healthy eating (that 'keeping healthy is difficult'). The statement proved to be a great stimulus for debate and I was astonished by the considered and perceptive nature of their responses. I was therefore keen to see if a similar type of statement could provoke equally insightful discussion with younger children. Given the sensitive nature of this activity, I thought through its delivery very carefully, including how I might react to children's emotional responses. At the time of reading the statement I was also keen to reassure the children of my ignorance and of their boundless intelligence, emphasising that they would know better than me, whether the statement was true.

Procedure

For the main study, I organised my timetable in such a way that I visited each of the four schools twice, carrying out two of the group tasks on each visit. This resulted in eight days of data collection. Four tasks were completed in each of the four schools, with different mixed groups of four children. Children were only asked to take part in one activity, rather than several. In most cases the groups comprised of two boys and two girls, however it was not always possible or useful to be consistent in this approach, given that more girls than boys had consented to take part in the study. A similar style of delivery and introduction was used for each task, across all the schools, however children's variable responses to these introductions, meant the task naturally deviated in many different directions. I had already familiarised myself with the participants during a series of unstructured visits to build rapport with the children in all four schools so the group tasks were as comfortable and unthreatening as possible. Each of the group tasks was video-recorded to ensure that children's verbatim wording was captured. An example of a transcript can be seen in Appendix 2.

Talking to Teachers, Talking to Children

Teachers have been consulted many times about their views on children's 'school readiness'. To touch on a couple of examples, Rimm-Kaufman *et al*. (2000) examined teachers' judgments of the prevalence and types of problems children present upon entering school. Difficulty following directions and lack of academic skills were the most common complications reported (Rimm-Kaufman *et al*., 2000). Similarly, Brooks and Murray (2016) investigated teachers' beliefs concerning 'school readiness' and children's voices in the

early years. During interviews, practitioners indicated they listen to – and act on – children's voices but are confused about 'school readiness', thus indicating that there might be a dissonance in early years approaches (Brooks and Murray, 2016). While teachers' views about 'school readiness' were not a focus during Study One, it struck me that it might be useful to share some of the children's ideas with Reception teachers as a means of encouraging a reflective dialogue about 'school readiness' and children's transition to Year 1. This involved revisiting each of the 4 participating school in October 2016 to share 4 anonymised versions of children's perfect classrooms with children's Reception teachers. As well as classroom drawings, snippets of transcribed dialogue were shared as part of the discussion. With teachers' permission I recorded the conversations using a voice recorder so I could use their ideas as part of my analysis. Importantly, the children's ideas drawings provoked teachers to speak candidly about the realities of children's transition out of the early years, and the differential balance of 'work' and play in Reception, compared to Year 1. Interestingly many of the teachers also used the drawings as an indicator of individual children's 'readiness' for Year 1. For example, one child's drawing, which was perceived as a 'scribble', provoked comment about a deficiency in ability. It would seem that these teachers were influenced by their perceptions of drawing in young children's development and perhaps in the expectation that drawing leads into writing. Such comments might also support a view, that 'developmental readiness' and 'developmental norms' permeate current conceptualisations of 'school readiness'.

In Spring 2017, I added a further layer of analysis to the 'perfect classroom' task, by revisiting drawings with the original participants, to see what they remembered about their 'perfect classroom' eight months later as Year 1 pupils. Individual children's responses to their own drawings were fascinating. While some children recollected all the main features of their classrooms and described their meaning, other participants appeared not to recognise their drawings. Their various reactions prompted me to consider the significance of children's emotional affectedness during teacher/adult-led tasks. The consequence of not making a connection appears to have been elucidated in some of the children's uncertain responses. During this phase of Study One, I also gave the participants an opportunity to change/edit their original classroom and to see the ideas of other children from other schools. Like the teachers, several children aired comment about the 'scribbled' classroom and showed more concern for the form of the drawing rather than its meaning. These similar responses might prompt us to think about the influence of school adults, and early years curricula on children's developing view of themselves and others. No voice recordings were used during these discussions to reflect informality of this stage of the process. With the children's permission, I recorded notes in a research journal instead.

Overall, it could be said that Study One used a fairly conventional 'child-friendly' approaches to gathering children's ideas. At the time of designing the study I did not appreciate just how complex and messy the research process would be, and how far the children's ideas would challenge my thinking about truth and knowledge. Clear answers about 'school readiness' weren't out there to be

found, rather they were generated in the moment, with bodies and materials working together to produce new knowledge. Dissatisfied with my approach during Study One, I embarked on designing a more emergent research space, that would better challenge conventional ways of working researching with children, the details of which are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Study Two Methodology

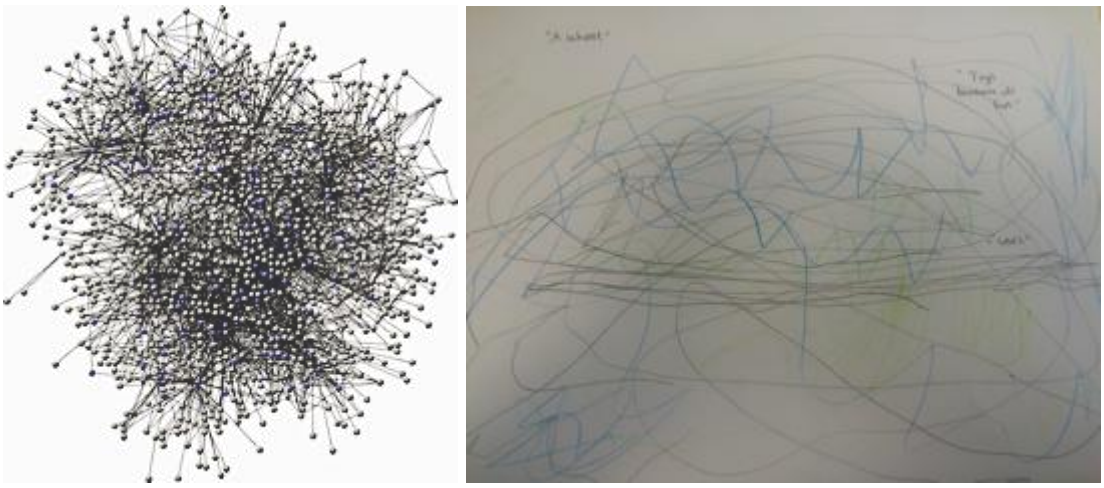


Image 8. *"I've had ideas since before I was born."* A classroom drawing created by a child in Study One.

Inspiration for my second study was sparked by one of the classroom drawings created by a child during Study One, as seen in Image 8. This drawing is important not only because it helped me find clarity and creativity when I needed it most, but also because it functions as a metaphor for the complex, indeterminate and playful encounters, which became central to my experience of researching with young children. Consequently, the reader is asked to hold this drawing in their mind's eye as they read about my second study, which mobilised a playful, Deleuzo/Guattarian-inspired methodology to investigate how Reception children's ideas could be used to complicate narrow

conceptualisations of ‘school readiness’.

Study Two took the form of an after-school ‘Ideas Club’; a playful and emergent research space in which I spent time with small groups of Reception children for an hour a week, over a four-week period. During the study I used picture books and play materials such as clay, to engage children in open-ended exploration and conversation. While children participated in some pre-planned activities, I also endeavoured to imbue in my approach, a certain degree of ‘slowness’ (Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and flexibility, to allow for connections and relations to be made across bodies and objects in unpredictable ways. The after-school study was named ‘Ideas Club’ to complement my open-ended approach and to raise the status of children’s ideas.

The contribution of theory to the development of my second study was further inspired by the similarities I perceived in the images put together in Image 8. The image on the left is a representation of the Deleuzo/Guartarrian concept of the rhizome – a concept often associated with experimentation and emergence, and an understanding of life as having no natural directions of growth (Leander and Boldt, 2012). The rhizome therefore relates well to my experiences of the research process, and stands in contrast to simplistic and fixed notions of growing up, as often associated with ‘school readiness’. Also poignant is the perceived ‘unreadiness’ of the child who produced the rhizomatic classroom drawing familiar from Image 8 (on the right) – a potentially evocative representation of the complex and emergent nature of life and learning in an early years classroom, but one that was roundly derided by a group of early

years teachers, on the basis of its scribbled form. Given this juxtaposition, the concept of the ‘rhizome’ turned out to be significant and integral to the design of Study Two as I set about creating a playful research space, which I hoped would acknowledge the intelligent and spontaneous emergence of children’s ideas and the messy nature of their experiences.

After-School Research

Study Two took the form of an after-school club. This was an hourly session, which ran weekly in three schools. I was first drawn to an after-school club approach having read Bailey’s (2017) ethnographic study of a school-based Minecraft Club, examining how a group of individuals interact whilst engaging in virtual world play. Bailey’s (2017) use of phrases ‘club community’ and ‘club participants’ invoked feelings of belonging and collaboration, and I wondered if I could cultivate a similar ethos by using an after-school club approach with Reception children. As I began to think more seriously about using an after-school club, I considered my own experiences of running extra-curricular activities during my time as a teacher – clubs that included a Film Club and a Handball Club. While after-school clubs are not wholly free from school expectations and associations, I have always found them to be more informal in atmosphere, and a valuable time to talk and play, beyond the ‘official’ school day. By reflecting on these experiences, I also understood that an after-school club might allow me the time and space to be slower, more autonomous, and more open-ended in my approach, compared to Study One – a study which had to fit in to the daily demands of the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2017) and general classroom life.

During the design of Study Two, ethnographically informed studies, such as Bailey's (2017), offered a useful way of thinking about my after-school approach given that I would be spending time with small groups of Reception children over a more extended period, compared to Study One. Ethnography has roots in anthropology, in studies that were focused on using observation to understand aspects of small communities in foreign countries from the point of view of its participants (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Punch 2009). This involved researchers living, often for years, among the inhabitants with the purpose of understanding the culture that these people shared (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The main aim of ethnography remains similar today: to study the cultural context of people's daily lives for an extended period of time, and observation remains key to this process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Gobo and Molle, 2016; Eriksson and Kovalainen ,2008). However, there is no single design for an ethnographic study (Punch, 2009) and this is why I have chosen to use a specific conceptualisation of the approach linked to the ontology and epistemology of post-structuralism, as described hereafter.

Gobo and Molle (2016) point out that ethnography comprises of two main approaches to observation: non-participant observation and participation observation. Using the former approach, researchers tend to avoid interaction, seemingly preferring to adopt an objective stance (Gobo and Molle, 2016). Alternatively, interaction can be used by researchers to establish a direct relationship with participants, on the assumption that this will provide a better understanding of their lives (Gobo and Molle, 2016). Based on a similar

supposition, I was keen to use Ideas Club to interact with, observe, and listen to Reception children in a slower, more considered way compared to Study One, over a series of four hour-long sessions. My approach also prioritised using the children's school environment, and using informal conversations, and other methods as important sources of information. However, it is important to point out that my approach cannot be considered 'naturalistic' (research in a natural state, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) given that Ideas Club was designed for research purposes.

Ethnographic approaches have been used in a number of post-structural studies (e.g. Lenters, 2016; Hollett and Ehret, 2015; Leander and Rowe, 2006) in order to access the experiences of the participants studied. Lenters (2016) used ethnographic methods to help map (for a 5-month period) the multimodal literacy practices of an 11-year old child. Working from the perspective that objects are participants alongside human actors, Lenters (2016) collected a range of artefacts, including figures with which the child played, to provide insight into the affect driven and embodied nature of his story telling – the kind of story telling that might not be recognised in traditional approaches to literacy instruction in the classroom. The methods employed for Leander and Rowe's (2006) non-representational approach were also part of a long-term ethnographic study. Leander and Rowe (2006) gathered a range of ethnographic data, documenting the literacy activities of a group 36 high school students, over the course of one school year. Through a rhizomatic analysis of their data, Leander and Rowe (2006) offer a less conventional, multimodal reading of students' literacy performances and classroom events, which they

believe shifts attention away from fixed forms of school literacy, towards new ways of seeing students connecting texts, modalities, and performed identities. It could be said that these studies (Lenters, 2016; Leander and Rowe, 2006) highlight how an ethnographic approach can help researchers challenge taken-for-granted knowledge in relation to children's everyday lives by offering detailed and complex alternative perspectives. In these studies (Lenters, 2016; Leander and Rowe, 2006) there is also a sense that ethnography occurs in many forms, including to account for a post-structural ontology, which means being aware of the commitments and limits of truth (Saukko, 2003). This is why I did not enter school sites for the purpose of eliciting knowledge and meaning about 'school readiness' through naturalistic observation. Instead I wanted to generate knowledge within the site and so I designed a specific space, 'Ideas Club', which I hoped would do justice to children's intelligence and allow for their ideas to emerge. This is not to say the children's ideas and stories should be read as 'timeless truths' (Lather, 2001), however it is hoped the children's ideas will be felt in relation to debates about 'school readiness'.

Indeed, it is important to consider what assumptions are implicit in an ethnographic methodology, and how far my study rationalised and challenged these assumptions. Drawing on Punch's (2009) discussion it could be said that Study Two mobilised some key characteristics of ethnography in the sense that it was an open-ended small-scale study, and used data collection methods that were eclectic and sensitive to the nature of the setting. My role could also be described as a participant observer, given that I was there to see and experience Ideas Club as it was taking place and to try to understand a little of

the world as Reception children do. However, the aim of this project is not to describe the culture of each participating school, as is often specified in discussions of ethnography (Punch, 2002), nor have I used ethnography to look at a specific activity over time, or for patterns in the children's behavior. Instead I sought to generate ample time and creative space to examine the meaning making of Reception children in an environment that was familiar to them, but where human and non-human elements might come together in school spaces in 'rhizomatic' ways, such as using clay in a meeting room and making fidget spinners in a Year 1 class. In this way, I have had to consider whether it is possible to have an ethnography that does not use the naturalistic school site in a traditional sense but plays with school space, for research purposes to inscribe new ways of seeing.

Such uncertainty has led me to explore specific conceptualisations of ethnography that also have a rhizomatic quality, including the work of Bailey (2017), who used Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to characterise his approach as a 'rhizomic ethnography'. For Bailey (2017) a rhizomic ethnography helped him articulate his epistemological approach to knowledge formation, which saw him tracing connections between human and non-human participants, as well as multiple on-screen and off-screen elements, across the course of his study. The work of Nespor (2013) is also interesting, given that he did not use a school site as the focus of his study, but as a point of entry for raising questions about how schools fit into the lives of children. With these studies in mind, I have chosen to characterise my approach as an emergent, Deleuze-inspired semi-ethnography, in which I strived to illuminate Reception children's capacities

through careful and open listening, and attribute complexity to the forms of knowledge that have been produced.

Creative, Messy Methodologies

Aside from the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari, inspiration for these methods also came in other forms, such as the creative methodologies of Gauntlett (2007), who has worked on helping people communicate ideas about their lives through 'making things' (e.g. using Lego, collage and video) and reflecting on the process. Gauntlet (2007) stresses that playful and imaginative methodologies can prompt a different, more reflexive kind of engagement from participants than talk-based methods, such as focus groups and interviews, which often capture 'instant descriptions' of participants' views. This suggested that making things hands-on as part of an after-school approach might allow Reception children time to apply their 'playful and creative intention' (Gauntlett, 2007) and stimulate more thoughtful reflection. The idea that children could be given time to play and make things also felt like a suitable way of reflecting and respecting the interests of young children, many of whom had described their enjoyment of using Lego and art materials in Study One.

During the development of Study Two I consulted a range of post-structuralist studies to identify how other researchers had used the work of Deleuze and Guattari to develop methodological approaches for working with young children. This meant that methods used in other studies were taken into account when planning Study Two. Using the work of Hollett and Ehret (2015) I understood that I wanted to create a more 'affective' atmosphere in Study Two, compared

to Study One, by using a greater range of materials, such as picture books and clay, in the hope of fostering unpredictable and felt connections across bodies and objects. Hollett and Ehret (2015) mobilised the conception of affective atmospheres to better understand their shared felt-experiences of video game-play. While Hollett and Ehret's (2015) theoretical approaches were used in the context of new media, rather than education, the relevance of their discussion lies in their argument that during gameplay experiences, human and nonhuman elements generate affective intensities that defy representation, and that affective atmospheres emerge through embodied activity. Based on a similar assumption I wanted to use the notion of affective atmosphere as a route to exploring how human and nonhuman entities could contribute to a research space exploring Reception children's ideas, without any guarantee of how these ideas might change my thinking about 'school readiness'.

Messy Methods

The affective, playful methodology adopted was designed to reflect the post-structuralist underpinnings of the research, to engage Reception children in ways that would capture and inspire their intelligence and creativity, and to provoke new thinking about 'school readiness'. While children participated in some pre-planned activities, as already indicated the approach was imbued with 'slowness' (Horton and Kraftl, 2006) and flexibility, understanding that knowledge about 'school readiness' was not there to be uncovered, but would likely be generated by the group in unexpected ways during our sessions. Given this open-ended approach, it is therefore difficult to offer a simple, replicable

account of Ideas Club, given that the methods used were so fluid and resistant to straightforward replication. However, the box below ("Ideas Club Methods") gives a flavour of the kinds of materials that were used to facilitate Ideas Clubs sessions.

Ideas Club Methods

Ideas Club Methods

- Open-ended exploration of clay
- Junk material challenges
- Using drawing as a response to picture books
- Using 'mini-mes' – photographs of the children cut out and added to lollypop sticks to use as puppets in open-ended play
- Snack time – a time for children to sit as a group and chat informally.

Clay was used in different ways during Ideas Club. I noticed that the children were motivated to use clay for much longer periods when they were exploring and experimenting for their own purposes. One child used the clay to make a model of their family. Another child used their thumb to press 'rabbit holes' into the clay, as you will see in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Junk materials were also used in different ways during Study Two. For example, in the first session, each child was given a plastic straw, a pipe cleaner, a paper cupcake case and some masking tape as a starting point for enquiry. Asking children to explore these materials prompted arbitrary, yet curious conversation. It also indicated how open-ended activity can evoke feelings of enjoyment and frustration. At the time of Ideas Club, 'fidget spinners' were a popular craze - recognisable as a palm-sized spinning toy made from metal or plastic. One of the children asked if we could make our own fidget spinners and so we did, using milk bottle tops and other materials. Important to note here is the child-led nature of this activity and

the importance of valuing the children's input throughout Ideas Club.

Working in open-ended ways meant video-recording was not seen as a viable recording option, given the practicalities of setting up equipment. Instead, a hand-held voice recorder was used in playful ways to capture children's ideas. For example, at the start of each Ideas Club session, the voice recorder was passed round the children for them to use, such as to say their name or share something about their day. This often led to laughter, as the children listened back to their voices. With the children's consent, the voice recorder was also present during discussions and their work with materials. Sometimes the children picked the voice recorder up to share a specific 'idea'. I hope this indicates the way the children were encouraged to take ownership of the recording process. Keeping a research diary also proved to be an invaluable way of recording my own reflections about the sessions.

Study Two methods were not used as part of a carefully applied approach but as part of an open-ended process of 'deliberate imprecision' (Law, 2004) where no one formula was adhered to. Gallager and Gallacher, (2002) argue that this is a 'methodological attitude' that should be at the heart of all research practice as it accepts that there is no one foolproof technique for dealing with the unpredictable nature of the social world. The 'mess' in social science research has also been discussed at length by Law (2004), who argued in favour of thinking about method in broader, looser and riskier terms:

"*To live more in and through slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet*

method. Multiple method. Modest method. Uncertain method. Diverse method. Such are the senses of method that I hope to see grow in and beyond social science." (Law, 2004, p. 4)

For Law, (2004) the standardisation of methods does offer some useful direction during the research process, as I found in Study One. However, too much uniformity can also limit the way in which researchers relate to the elusive nature of the social world (Law, 2004). And so, bolstered by Law's discussion (2004), I came to appreciate that I did not have to deal with the already ambiguous and emotive concept of 'school readiness' in a traditional, logical way but could adapt normative social science methods in creative ways to account for the slipperiness of the 'school readiness' concept, and the messes of reality. This is not to say that an open-ended approach was not difficult, and there were times when I inadvertently tried to assume control over the Ideas Club sessions, as further discussed later in the chapter.

So far I have discussed the development of my methodological approach to working with Reception children. Where Study One used a more structured approach to gathering children's ideas (as guided by the methodologies of other researchers) Study Two occupied a more open-ended research space, as a way of letting children's ideas emerge. It is important to highlight here the emphasis on the body and the physical in Study Two's approach, was a conscious attempt to counter what we regarded as the methodological compromises inherent in Study One. A more detailed overview of the limitations of my approach is offered in a subsequent section of this chapter, alongside the

following: (1) A discussion of my analytical approach, (2) a review of some of the procedures undertaken in regards to ethical concerns, and (3) an account of some of the tensions that emerged during the research process, including in relation validity.

Engaging with Data

"My mind is not straight lines. My mind is a clutter and a mess. It is my mind, but it is also very like other minds. And like all minds, like every mind that there has ever been and every mind that there will ever be, it is a place of wonder."

A pertinent piece of text from David Almond's (2013) book, 'My Name is Mina'. As my one of my favourite authors, it only felt right that some of Almond's word should appear in this thesis. The words of main character Mina felt particularly fitting.

In an early attempt at writing about the analysis process, found in my ethics application of 2015, I expressed my plan to use coding, to help make sense of my data:

*"A process of **constant comparison analysis** will occur throughout Study One allowing the researcher to anticipate and assess the point at which **data saturation** occurs. This will include the researcher making notes directly after the focus group sessions, documenting the general tone of the conversation, key topics and any unexpected ideas. Following this study there will be a more thorough period of analysis whereby the individual mosaics (transcripts, children's pictures etc.) are 'pieced together' as a means of **uncovering any emerging themes** (Moss and Clark, 2011). As part of this process, a **transcript** for each focus group activity will be produced and **a coding frame***

developed through which the content will be analysed." (Emphasis added, for purpose of thesis).

This writing reveals my initial understanding that to produce credible research, I needed to travel down a safe and bounded path of interpretative data analysis, which included transcribing interviews and producing a coding frame. This understanding was legitimised through my reading of a range of research literature such as Halkier, (2010), Wibeck *et al*. (2007), and Creswell and Miller, (2000), all of which supported my supposition that coding is the preferred method of analysis for many qualitative researchers. However, like other researchers (MacLure, 2013; Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) I have since negotiated more complex and transgressive routes of analysis, as influenced by the children's ideas, the complexity of which demanded more creative ways of working. The tree-like structure that typically underlies coding, the process of looking for themes and patterns, also conflicts with some of the key tenets of post-structuralist research:

"For post-structuralism, coding offends on a number of fronts. First it positions the analyst at arm's length from 'her' data, encouraging illusions of interpretative dominion over an enclosed field (…) *Coding also tends to take you 'away' from the data – from their detail, complexity and singularity…"* (MacLure, 2013, p. 167 and 169)

Tellingly, Kuby *et al*. (2015) described finding it hard to 'concretise post-structural theory' by outlining a method of analysis – a challenge I can certainly relate to here, given the somewhat diffractive, theoretical way I went about my

work. Like Sondergaard (2002), my approach to analysis can therefore not be acquired ‘as a sort of technique’.

While my approach to analysis is not necessarily easy to describe because of the challenges to stability and consistency that comes with post-structuralist thinking, it is useful to point to the writers (e.g. MacLure, 2013; Mazeii, 2014; Sondergaard, 2002) who inspired me to engage with children’s ideas in more transgressive ways. MacLure (2013) for example considered the capacity of ‘wonder’ for guiding qualitative data analysis as a counterpart to the exercise of reason through interpretation, classification, and representation – processes which often produce sameness and make the world stand still. For MacLure (2013) working with wonder is about responding to those occasions when something as seemingly insignificant as a field note or an object glows, or reaches out and ‘grasps us’, moments when the data chooses us - *“we, and the data, do not preexist one another”*. With MacLure’s (2013) work in mind, I found the confidence to be led by the wonder I found in children’s ideas, their words, their objects, and their drawings, ideas that were somehow suspended between ‘knowing and unknowing’ and could not be wholly ‘recuperated as knowledge’ (p. 228) about ‘school readiness’. Moments of wonder (MacLure, 2013) such as these could alternatively be thought of as ‘momentary intensities’ (Massumi, 1995) or ‘felt focal moments’ (Ehret, Hollett and Jocius, 2016), notions which are underpinned, complexly so, by the non-representational logic of ‘affect’:

"In its largest sense, affect is part of the Deleuzian project of trying to understand, and comprehend, and express all of the incredible, wondrous, tragic, painful and destructive configurations of things and bodies and temporally mediated, continuous events" (Colman, 2005, p. 11).

Interestingly, MacLure (2013a) explains that to be guided by wonder is not to abandon coding altogether – with wonder, we are still classifying the data, still trying to make sense of it, but we are doing so in a more open-ended way to that which we are used to.

Work by Sondergaard, (2002) also influenced the way I engaged with data in this project, having demonstrated the potential of using a post-structuralist approach to facilate a *"productive, fun and transgressive way to do research"* (p. 187). As Sondergaard (2002) points out, perhaps the most fundamental claim of post-structuralism is to reject the possibility of ever arriving at a 'truth''. Thus what becomes interesting for a researcher is how to create analytical tools that are not only closely related to their own study, but also help rupture knowledge and processes that are usually taken-for-granted (Sondergaard, 2002). To align with this way of thinking, I decided to focus my analysis on the ideas from Study One and Study Two that appeared most complex and therefore most likely to challenge narrow ways of thinking about 'school readiness', such as those that sustain the ready/unready binary. As part of this process I also tried to work with children's ideas in ways that would not allow for individual children to be judged using developmental 'school readiness' frameworks. This meant displacing anthropocentric readings of data (which

takes human beings as the starting point and centre), with the view that ideas do not emerge from individuals, but from complex, indeterminate entanglements between bodies and matter. In this way, the ideas rather than the children became the 'constitutive force' (Hultman and Taguchi, 2010). Sondergaard's (2002) use of 'alienation' in her analysis therefore has some resonance with my approach in the way she consciously used alienating language to "pull the reader out of a safe discursive existence" (p. 197). Similarly, my decision to refer to children as creators, not to use pseudonyms, to work with 'non-human forces', and to emphasise children's intelligence could be read as potentially unsettling approaches to working with 'school readiness'. In this way, my approach to analysis could also be likened to the work of Willis (1988) who by presenting earth through the eyes of an alien (Dr Xargle) encouraged us to see the everyday world from a fresh standpoint.

What I did not know at the start of my analysis was how far the data would increase my attentiveness to children's strong relation to things and the ability of these 'non-human' forces to "play and work as constitutive factors in children's learning and becomings." (Hultman & Taguchi, 2010, p. 527) A perfect classroom full of 'Shopkins' toys was the starting point for this journey, which subsequently led me into the fields of New Materialism and post-humanism, where things and matter are granted agency in combination with humans. Through these lenses other data started to 'glow' (MacLure, 2013) in ways I had not noticed before, such as in children's work with clay. Not only does this indicate how I selected the data to include in this thesis (or how it chose me) but also that many different theoretical perspectives informed my

analysis - many of which might not even be named in this thesis, such is the open, indeterminate nature of knowledge. To work in this way could be described as a form of ‘diffractive analysis’, which is described by Mazzei (2014) as a type of analysis (after coding) where data is read through multiple theoretical insights as a way of spreading thought in unpredictable patterns. Mazzei (2014) borrowed this term from Barad (2007) who in her own work drew on the insights of a range of theories to move herself away from habitual normative readings of data. Poignantly, if I had coded the data from Study One (in the traditional sense) as I had intended to, it might have prevented me from encountering other theories, plugging into the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (such as rhizome), or fostering a more playful approach during my second study.

To summarise, a diffractive analysis was put to work wherein ‘school readiness’ was analysed with/in several of the children’s ideas, which were diffractively read through other ideas, such as those from teachers, from theory, and from picture books. It is accepted that my analysis cannot ever offer a full understanding of children’s ideas and their relations with things, but that an attention to theory and to non-human forces can complicate conversations about ‘school readiness’. The process of ‘plugging in’ to data helped me to confront the vast array of ‘texts’ that I collected during Study One and Study Two (video and audio recordings, field notes, objects such as bracelets and clay models, drawings, junk models and paintings) – texts that held (and continue to hold) the potential to generate a ceaseless number of ideas. The theory I used did not make easy, quick work of analysis, however it did lead to

enchantment and a certain richness in the data, through the process of delving deep below the surface of children's intelligent ideas.

Ethical Encounters

In the introduction of this thesis I suggested that ethical questions form a significant part of this thesis. I also hinted that research ethics pertain much more than procedural ethics - the matter of adhering to rules and codes. In this short, but critical section I underline how the ethics underpinning this project (the way I have tried to relate to and respect children's alterity) might be considered dissimilar to the values underpinning early years education where 'the other' is made into the same (Moss, 2012). The words of Dahlberg (2003) help to explicate this point:

"Putting everything which one encounters into pre-made categories implies we make the other into the Same, as everything which does not fit into these categories, which is unfamiliar has to be overcome. Hence alterity disappear"

By contrast, I have worked with the aim of celebrating the complexity of children's lives and embracing the larger issues that 'school readiness' raises, such as the meanings of education and images of the child, the teacher and the school.

To begin it is important to make clear that this project was conducted under the auspices of Northumbria University, which involved seeking approval and clearance from the Faculty of Health & Life Sciences Ethical Committee. In addition to drawing on university protocol, BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines

were an important starting point for thinking about research ethics in this project. They emphasise that ethics is an active and iterative process:

"We recommend that at all stages of a project – from planning through conduct to reporting – educational researchers undertake wide consultation to identify relevant ethical issues (…) This means that ethical decision-making becomes an actively deliberative, on-going and iterative process." (BERA, 2018, p. 2)

As a framework for my discussion of ethics, I drew on the work of Guillemin and Gillam (2004) who distinguished two different dimensions of ethics in research, termed 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice'. This allowed me to foreground several ethically important matters from Study One and Study Two, which were not necessarily accounted for in the early 'procedural' stages of the research process. In the following sections, I will also discuss the way in which post-structuralist thinking has altered my conceptualisation of research ethics in relation to researching with Reception children, and my position as a teacher/researcher.

Procedural Ethics

Seeking approval from the Northumbria University's Faculty of Health & Life Sciences Ethical Committee occurred early in the research process (March 2016). It involved, among many aspects, outlining the design of my first study, and indicating my step-by-step approach to recruiting schools. This included using an information letter (Appendix 3) to contact the head teachers of

selected schools. Usefully, my earlier work as a teacher in the borough facilitated a positive response from four head teachers, one of whom had been my previous employer. Soon after, I met with the head teachers to talk about the research project, to respond to their questions and concerns. I also met class teachers and invited their participation on a voluntary basis. As part of the process of seeking parents' consent, I was required to make sure parents understood the research project, including how and to whom the findings would be shared (Participant Information Sheet, Appendix 4). Using a model of 'opt-in' consent, the parents were offered a reply slip to actively agree to their child's participation. Included in this form was a requirement for the parent to indicate whether they were happy for their child to be video-recorded. Notably, the details of Study Two could not be outlined in my original ethics application, given the emergent nature of my study design. For this reason I submitted a request in March 2017 to amend my approved ethics (Appendix 5). On this second form I gave details of my after-school club approach and the kinds of playful methods I hoped to use. I also addressed specific issues, linked to my after-school club approach, such as my need to make firm plans for the safe handover of children to parents/carers at the end of each session.

Informed consent is considered a fundamental ethical principle and is thus highly prominent in procedural ethics (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), as evidenced in Northumbria University's Faculty Ethics Handbook and in the ethics of social research organisations such as BERA. Informed consent is usually obtained at the start of a study. However, it is strongly advised that researchers should not see consent as a 'one off event' (David *et al*., 2001),

but rather as a part of an on-going interpersonal ethical process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 272):

"Informed consent is at heart an interpersonal process between researcher and participant, where the prospective participant comes to an understanding of what the research project is about and what participation would involve and makes his or her own free decision about whether, and on what terms, to participate."

To facilitate Reception children's informed consent for Study One, I understood that I needed to share the purpose and content of the research project with them as a start, and then allow time for them to assimilate the information (Einarsdottir, 2007; Dockett *et al.*, 2012; Cocks, 2006). For this reason, protocols for Study One included a ten-minute introductory chat in each Reception class, with the aim of opening up a collaborative account of the research project and the consent process. During this introduction I described the purposes to which the children's ideas would be put, explaining that their ideas might be shared with teachers and researchers to help them think differently about school. These ideas were expressed in the following ways:

- *That a researcher is a 'learner', and that children are the experts*
- *That research is about 'searching' for an answer and the children might be able to help me find the answer*
- *That the researcher is trying to find the answer to these questions: Do Reception children feel ready to go to Year 1? How can teachers help children get ready?*

I also used a PowerPoint presentation of images to introduce the children to the notion of research (e.g. binoculars and thought bubbles). Positively, the children asked a range of questions, evidencing the usefulness of this introduction in promoting an informed research process:

"What does a researcher do? Are you searching for something?"
"Who is going to help you find the answer? Is it the children?"
"Are you going to help us to work better?"
"So you need to know about children and what they do?"
"Is a researcher like a scientist then?"

Introductory talks with children occurred on the same day that the parental consent forms were sent home, as a way of encouraging consent conversations between parents and children. Also important is the fact that before any research activities took place I spent one month (June 2016) across the four schools becoming familiar with individual school contexts, school adults and more importantly the children. This gave children plenty of time to reflect upon the nature of the project and consider their participation.

I returned to each school site in July 2016 to begin Study One. Children with parental permission were asked for their consent at the start of each group activity, in an informal verbal manner. I decided to avoid a formal recording of children's consent in case the children's decision to participate appeared unchangeable (as suggested by Dockett *et al.*, 2012). A 'consent conversation'

took place at the start of each activity took place and followed a pattern similar to that advised by Farrimond (2012, p. 177-178):

1. *I introduced myself.*
2. *I stated what the task would involve.*
3. *I asked for children's participation e.g. is that ok?*
4. *I clarified how the children could withdraw.*
5. *I gave children an opportunity to ask questions.*

It has been discussed that a great deal of a project's ethical integrity rests on the researcher's own personal skills and judgment (Christensen and Prout, 2002) and ability to operate reflexively (Cocks, 2006) during the consent process. I would argue that my previous experience working with children was of significant value throughout this part of the project. However, while consent discussions with children appeared positive and useful, it is hard to ensure that any participants in social research (whether adults or children) are sufficiently informed (Gallagher *et al*., 2010). I would also suggest that post-structuralist thinking adds a further layer of ambiguity to procedural consent processes, a matter that will be described later in this section.

Similar consent procedures were adopted for Study Two (Appendix 6). These procedures included an informed 'opt in' parental consent model, and the use of exploratory talks to introduce the Reception children to 'Ideas Club'. Conversely, the open-ended nature of Study Two, did pose specific problems, in terms of how much I could fully inform parents and children about each Ideas

Club session. My ‘Letter of Invitation’ to parents and children (Appendix 7) thus focused on children’s amazing ideas, and the practical nature of the sessions:

“During the sessions, we will use drawing and construction materials to design and invent things, and we might even build a model of ourselves! That’s because I’d also like this club to be an opportunity for children to think about what makes them unique and special. I have some great picture books to inspire our ideas.”

Still, the slightly ambiguous open-ended nature did result in some confusion for children, one of whom had been told by his mum that the after-school club was a ‘type of science club’, during which he might make a rocket.

So far, I have described my commitment to attending to the procedural stages of research ethics. During these early procedural stages I completed the application form for Northumbria University’s Ethics Committee, and demonstrated my awareness of specific issues relating to researching with young children. The subsequent approval of my application indicated that the committee were satisfied with the measures that I had put in place to ensure that my study was ethically sound. However, I have come to understand that ethics at the procedural level is not the whole of ethics, it is a type of ethics ‘imposed from the outside’ that cannot account for the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). In introducing a post-structuralist framework to my project I also recognise that the very act of

trying to define ethics through universal procedures and systems does not sit well with post-structuralist thinking (Popke, 2003). Therefore, I have reconceived ethics in various ways to reflect post-structuralist thinking, and my experiences of researching with children. I have come to see ethics as a commitment to openness and difference (Popke, 2003) and as an imminent and inventive process (Coleman, 2008). Adopting this view of ethics, which looks beyond notions of proper conduct and adjudicating action, was highly influential during the development of Study Two and encouraged me to develop ethically responsive encounters (McCormack 2003), and new forms of corporeal engagement with Reception children. Deleuze's (1988) Spinozist interpretation of a good and joyful encounter was also imperative in my effort to 'encounter' Reception children's happenstance ideas during Study Two:

"When a body "encounters" another body, or an idea another idea, it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole…" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 19)

Indeed, Spinoza argued that joyful encounters with other humans (and other finite things) can produce affects that make our bodies more capable (Lord, 2010, Thrift, 2003). Thus, I hoped that Ideas Club would provide the space for children and I to become 'more capable' and more 'power-full' (Sellers, 2013) together.

New, experimental understandings of ethics resonate considerably with my development as a researcher. These new understandings are not concerned with normative principles, but rather they express ethics as an openness to new

possibilities and affective engagements (Popke, 2009). Popke (2009) claims that new understandings of ethics have invigorated human geography research, infusing the field with playfulness, experimentation and a renewed interest in materialist, corporeal and performative ontologies, as evidenced in the work of Horton and Kratfl (2006) Usefully, several other researchers (Coleman, 2008; Thrift, 2004; Gallacher and Gallager, 2008; McCormack, 2008) have expressed a similar ethical spirit:

"…ethics is not (only) a set of pre-existent conventions and obligations into which research relations can be fitted, but rather ethics emerge – become – through the relations between and constitutive of researcher(s) and researched." (Coleman, 2008, p. 106)

Coleman (2008) developed her understanding of ethics in line with Deleuzian thinking and Deleuze's reading of Spinoza. Deleuze (1988) surmised that Spinoza's philosophy transports us to another dimension of ethics, ethics as encounters, which have the potential to affect and be affected in many possible ways. Attending to the Spinozist idea of affect helped McCormack (2003) in his geographical research to reframe Dance Movement Therapy as a field of affective potential through which new modes of thinking and feeling can emerge. This stands in contrast to seeing Dance Movement Therapy as a tactic of recovery or a site from which meaning can be extracted (McCormack, 2003). Likewise, the Spinozist idea of affect led me to see Ideas Club sessions as imbued with potential rather than a site from which answers about 'school readiness' could be gleaned.

An affective understanding of ethics can be identified in the methodology of Study Two. For Study Two I worked from the assumption that the study would 'become' ethical through my efforts to make each Ideas Club event an affective, emergent encounter. Similarly, I hoped I could 'energise ethics' (McCormack, 2003) by paying attention to the corporeal dimension of human experience. This is why I sought to make Ideas Club a playful research space, through which new thinking might emerge. In contrast, my Study One approach was underpinned by a more representational style of thinking, which focused somewhat too fervently on the 'high risk' nature of my research (as perceived by University protocols) in relation to the involvement of Reception children. Indeed, the perceived 'high risk' nature of my research prompted me to explore the specific ethical implications of researching with young children, and the variety of perspectives that exist in relation to how children should be treated. Accordingly, on my ethics application (Appendix 8) I described my understanding of these issues, and the value of using a 'highly reflexive approach'. My reference to Article 12 of the United Nations on the Rights of the Child (1989) also indicates the association I had made between ethics and children's rights, and my motivation for including Reception children's views. My decision to use mosaic methods (Clark and Moss, 2001) is likewise revealing, in the sense that these methods appeared to be an objectively ethical way of capturing the voices of young children, as 'experts and agents in their own lives' (Clark and Moss, 2001). At the time, such decisions were intended to legitimise my project as 'ethical' in my own eyes and in those of the independent reviewers who were to scrutinise my application. However, I have

since grappled with the credulous nature of these suppositions as a result of my ‘messy’ research experiences. I now understand that no single research method offers a ‘fool-proof’ ethically valid tool (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). In agreement with Popke (2003), I am also certain that complexity, always inherent in the research process, will always exceed and undo predetermined formulations.

An understanding of ethics based on children’s rights, participation, and principles of care, fair treatment and protection from harm was influential in the development of my Study One methodology. It prompted me to use mosaic methods as a tool for capturing Reception children’s ideas, and to use these methods in a fairly structured, seemingly valid way. It could also be said that my early understanding of ethics was influenced by what Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) call a broadly Cartesian model of subjectivity, which positions children as agentic beings. A Cartesian model underpins many participatory-style research approaches and is evident in the field of ‘new social studies’ (e.g. Prout and James, 1990), which has attempted to rethink children as more or less stable, coherent beings (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). This particular model privileges children’s voices as an authentic source (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) and reduces children in terms of knowing and knowledge (Sellers, 2013). However, as previously discussed, to use post-structuralist thinking is to disrupt notions of truth and knowledge, and for this reason I moved towards a ‘becoming’ model of subjectivity for Study Two. Such a model accepts humans as imperfect and ever changing, and the research process as persistently unpredictable in nature (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). Based on

this understanding, for Study Two, I focused less on my original intent to 'capture' Reception children's voices in relation to 'school readiness', and more so on the affective, transformative potential of events involving children. In this way, I would argue that ethics 'became' a positive intensity, negotiated anew, during each Ideas Club session, rather than merely a moral underpinning, as in Study One.

To coincide with my discussion of ethics, I wish to re-examine notions of power, as previously discussion in Chapter 2. This is because the concept of 'power' features strongly in ethical discussions about children's research:

"In essence an approach based on children's rights speaks to one of the ongoing dilemmas of childhood research: the imbalance of power between adults and children." (Lundy and McEvoy, 2011, p. 142)

My ethics application of 2016 (Appendix 8) drew attention to this 'imbalance', through my suggestion that group methods can help dilute the 'inevitable' adult/child power asymmetries that are inherent in research with children (as supported by Morgan *et al*., 2002, and Hennessy and Heary, 2005). Although not indicated on my application, it is also significant that mosaic methods have been described as prompting a shift in power, or an element of 'role reversal', for the children and researchers involved (Clark and Moss, 2001). Once again, these understandings align with a Cartesian model of agency and 'empowerment', as they imply that, without help from adults, children cannot fully exercise their 'agency' in research encounters (Gallacher and Gallagher,

2008; Sellers, 2003). In light of my Study One experiences and my engagement with post-structuralist research, I have since used the notion of 'power-full-ness' (Sellers, 2013) to problematise this understanding. For Study Two I worked on the assumption that power is not a commodity, but rather, a force in perpetual motion, which allows all humans, including children, to 'become power-full' (Sellers, 2013). I came to this understanding because the children in Study One negotiated the research process in all sorts of unexpected ways, the likes of which often made me feel lost and uncomfortable. Thus, children's power-fullness was a perceptible, affective feature of the Study One process. I therefore did not use group methods during Study Two for the purpose of diluting power or making my research 'more ethical', as purported in Study One. Instead, (drawing on Sellers' (2013) discussion) I used group methods to generate a multiplicity of relations (in/among several children and myself) in the hope that flows of becoming-power-full would emerge and produce affective results. In this way, I tried to embrace my vulnerability as a researcher, and the 'necessarily complex', messy nature of the research process (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). My decision to use group methods, in combination with materials, during Study Two also demonstrates my attention to intra-activity (Barad, 2007) and the potential of these types of corporeal relations (forces and affects among humans and materials, Sellers 2013) to enhance children's 'powerful-ness'. Put more simply, reflecting Deleuze, I was trying to produce 'good encounters'

As a final point, it could be said that power-full understandings such as these, disrupt institutional versions of ethics, and the process of seeking children's 'informed consent'. As I see it, even if children are seen to give their 'informed

consent' at the start of a study their participation might shift in power-full, complex and subtle ways throughout a research event, such as in their silences or in their befuddling lines of conversation. It could be that it is in these very moments, when the boundaries of 'what matters' in research are tested, that the ethical potential of a research encounter emerges. Perhaps, cultivating faithfulness to similar becoming-power-full moments can help our classroom encounters with children become ethical too.

Using a post-structuralist framework, it is my aim to foster alternative narratives about ethics in children's research in relation to affect and encounter. Consequently, my discussion of two ethically important encounters in this next section emphasises the singularity of events and the open-ended, unpredictable nature of the engagement between researcher and children. The chosen examples offer a chance to assess my actions, and unpack my experiences in light of post-structuralist thinking. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 275) put it:

"In being reflexive (…) a researcher would be alert not only to issues related to knowledge creation but also ethical issues in research. This alertness might include conscious consideration of a range of formal ethical positions and adoption of a particular ethical stance."

Likewise, I am interested in replacing the question of how *should* we research with children, with how *might* we research with children. Thus, the examples chosen will elucidate the change that occurred in my thinking between Study One and Study Two, in relation to these questions.

A Heated Debate

The first research event I will describe took place during the pilot study of Study One. It was significant for me because it made me reflect on my role in the process and my inexperience as a researcher. More recently, the event has helped me interrogate the ethical character of the 'moderator' role and the consensus that moderators have to be highly skilled (Gibson, 2007). The nature of the event has also prompted me to consider how far an 'intense group discussion', which could be perceived in negative terms, contributes to an affective, and ethical, research experience for children.

The term moderator is often associated with group methods and so I became familiar with perceptions of effectual moderation during the development of Study One. Through my reading (Gibson, 2007; Wilbeck, *et al*., 2007; Hennessy and Heary, 2005), I understood that I needed to be skillful in various ways, such as to create the 'right environment' (Gibson, 2007) and to encourage an open and interactive dialogue (Gibbs, 1997). I also understood that such skills would ultimately influence the success of Study One activities and the quality of the data (as discussed by Krueger, 1998; Wilbeck *et al*., 2007). Such are the perceived demands of the role, Gibson (2007) goes as far as to suggest that researchers should consider training and/or taking the time to observe an expert in the field. Consequently, my reading of focus group literature made me somewhat nervous about my inexperience as a researcher and predisposed me to want to aspire to be a particular kind of moderator during Study One. Such a moderator would facilitate the 'ideal' balance between structure and openness and safeguard the children by intervening in more

intense conversations (as recommended by Gibson, 2007).

As stated, this event happened during the pilot study of Study One. For this reason, there are no audio recordings of it. Instead, I have a set of notes I made during and after the event, which I will draw on now. Six children and I were in the school library, midway through a mosaic activity, discussing the details of children's 'perfect' classroom drawings. Of importance to the children was *who* they had drawn in their classrooms. It appeared equally important to one child that he state whom he had *not* drawn - "*There's no girls [in this classroom]"* This prompted a heated discussion concerning the disputable superiority of boys or girls. The children playfully argued over whom was 'best' and even sang rhymes to each other to provoke a reaction. Admittedly, I was a little thrown by this conversation, as it presented me with a dilemma – how long should I let this conversation go on for? At the time the conversation felt futile and it appeared to position two quieter children as bystanders. Furthermore, while I was reluctant to formalise the proceedings with an authoritative approach, I also did not want children to see the research as unimportant. To try and achieve a balance of the two, I decided to wait a short while for the topic of conversation to become saturated before using questioning to prompt a change of focus, which allowed quieter children a way back into conversation. Immediately after this activity, I considered how useful it was for this exchange to have occurred during piloting, given how much I learnt about messy, complex nature of the research process and children's 'power-fulness' (Sellers, 2013). I could also see how this type of fervent discussion might be valuable in the main study, not

only for revealing participants' 'fascinations' and interests but also for allowing the research to move in unexpected directions (Kitzinger, 1994).

The Secret Note

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Ideas Club experience was tied up in moments of happenstance conversation and in the simple act of getting to spend time *with* Reception children. For this reason, it feels 'right' to include a narrative (see below) that encapsulates an intense and unplanned encounter with a Reception child, an encounter that also raises ethical questions about the way we work with children in schools.

Wednesday

It was my first day in school as part of the pilot of Study Two. I was there to meet the children who had signed up for the after-school club and to spend some time with them in the classroom. As part of the 'meeting' I'd hoped to introduce the children to my 'other' role as a researcher and to talk with them about their expectations of the club. As I walked through the door of Mrs Trevor's classroom, I was pleased to see that the children were already 'out and about' in the classroom, playing. I didn't like interrupting teachers during whole class teaching, as I knew how frustrating this could be.

Not long after appearing in the classroom, I was greeted by Jed. Jed often made a point of coming to speak to me when I was in school doing supply teaching. He appeared to have formed some kind of connection with me, since the occasion we had got chatting on a previous visit I had made to his classroom. During that previous conversation, he had told me that he got really angry sometimes and he didn't know why….

“Hi Miss Heads! It’s nice to see you again. I’m going to be in your Ideas Club. Is it Ideas Club yet?”

“Hi Jed. Lovely to see you too. No, Ideas Club is tomorrow. I’m just here to spend some time with you in the classroom so I can get to know you better.”

I noticed Jed was clutching a round, coloured piece of paper in his hand, which he had clearly cut out himself. I could see it had some writing on. This writing comprised of the letters of his name.

“What’s that you’ve got Jed?”

Jed gestured for me to come closer to him and in a whispered voice, he said:

“It’s a secret message. I made it. It’s very precious to me.”

Without saying much more, Jed returned to playing in the classroom.

Later, after having met with Jed and his peers to talk about the club, Jed approached me again in the classroom. He showed me the ‘secret message’ that we had talked about earlier.

“I think you should have this Miss Heads but you have to keep it safe. Do you promise?”

“Are you sure Jed? I thought it was really important to you?”

“You keep it, OK?!”

“OK Jed, if you’re sure.”

And with that, I slipped the note into the plastic bag I had with me.

“So I’ll see you at after-school club tomorrow?”

“Huh?”

“Ideas Club?”

“Ah OK. You need to call it by its name, not a different name!”

It wasn’t till I was at home, later that evening that I came across the note again. I smiled at the note and thought about how lovely it was that Jed had decided to give it to me. I admit that I was very tempted to pop it straight in the bin - if I’d kept every picture a child had drawn for me over the years, I’d have needed a bigger house! However, this gesture felt different somehow. So, instead of throwing it away, I decided to glue Jed’s note into the front cover of my ‘Ideas Club’ journal, which I was going to use as part my record keeping throughout the course of Study Two. I thought it would be a nice reminder of my first day of piloting and meeting the ‘Ideas Club’ children.

Thursday

It was the first day of Ideas Club. I arrived at lunchtime so I could spend another afternoon with the children before the club began. No sooner had I arrived in the classroom and Jed was by my side.

“Miss Heads, have you kept my secret note I gave you? I’ve been thinking about it all the time!”

In that moment, I was really taken aback by Jed’s proclamation. Thank goodness I had kept the note!

“Yes Jed, I’ve kept it. In fact I’ve stuck it in the front of my ‘Ideas Club’ book. It’s where I’m going to keep all your ideas.”

I removed the book from my bag and held it out to show Jed. A kind of relief spread across his face. He gave me a smile, a 'thumbs up' and off he went.

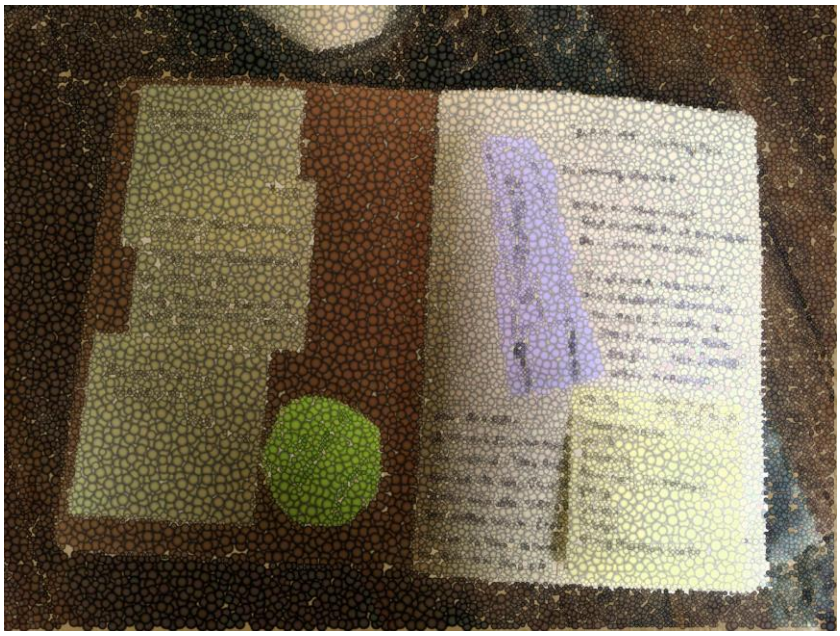


Image 9. The inside pages of my Ideas Club journal. [Distortion is deliberate to protect anonymity]

'Bodies mingling' (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012) feels an apt way to describe my presence in the classroom on that first day of the Ideas Club pilot study when it was my intention to get to know the Reception children a little better. At this time, I was still rather human-centred in my approach and not necessarily sensitive to the way that materials also 'mingle' in the everyday practices of early childhood education (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012), an understanding I came to during my analysis of children's ideas (Chapters 4 and 5). Yet an object - an 'interesting', 'material, and 'risky' object (Latour, 2005) - featured strongly in this ethical encounter and so it feels useful to plug briefly into theory to get closer to it. The particular theoretical ideas I have used to think about this encounter are similar to that drawn upon by Pacini-Ketchabaw, (2012), who explored how

a clock is “both a producer and an enabler” in an early years classroom (p. 155). As well as drawing from several bodies of knowledge on post-humanism (e.g. Barad’s, 2007 intra-activity framework), Pacini-Ketchabaw, (2012) used the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to help her focus on the relationships between subjects and objects, and the performative aspects of the clock. Pacini-Ketchabaw’s (2012, p. 156) use of Deleuzian concepts to conceptualise ‘ordinary’ classroom events is also expounded here:

“In the classroom, assemblages are formed and quickly rearranged. The clock-educator-child assemblages are tightly linked to the deployment of practices (…) The elements in the assemblage do not necessarily precede the assemblage; they emerge through it.”

Conceptualising ‘the secret note’ encounter in similar terms means paying attention to the particular way in which the note-child-researcher assemblage worked like a positive force to allow me to build a ‘more-ethical’ relationship (Mathieu, 2016) with the child. In this way, the note could be seen as a legitimate research participant in itself, on account of its ability to produce affects for both the child and myself:

“Our relationships, social bonds, would be as airy as clouds were there only contracts between subjects. In fact, the object, specific to Hominidae, stabilizes our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions (…) The object, for us, makes our history slow.” (Serres and Latour, 1995, p. 87)

With this interpretation in mind, ‘the secret note’ encounter could therefore be used to raise questions about the ethics that underpin our everyday encounters with children. What might have happened if I’d thrown the note away? What kind of relationship might have been produced? Thus, it became my understanding that it is in ‘small’, everyday moments that ethical events unfold (Horton, 2008).

Fun, Open-ended After-School Clubs

Many of my reflections on the Ideas Club process were concerned with the children’s levels of engagement during the sessions and the challenge of trying to overcome the temptation to predetermine the activities to ensure ‘useful’ data was generated and collected. Similar challenges were described by reseachers Blaisdell *et al*. (2018, p. 14), who also took an open-ended approach to working with young children:

‘In our piloting, we were keen to establish ways of working with children that centered their own creativity and play, shaped by the materials we provided but not directed by us. However, (…) we struggled to balance our own agenda with the more open-ended methods we had used.’

During the study it was noticeable that children's engagement was markedly greater when they were given the opportunity to experiment with materials, such as clay, on their own terms, favouring the process of learning rather than fixed outcomes. During one session, children audibly groaned when they were told they would be set a 'challenge', which was taken as a signal to let them pursue their own experimentation. Gradually, I became more sensitised to seeing children's meaning-making in new ways, and found that the intelligence and creativity of Reception children was best captured, not through questioning but by being present in the narratives and objects they produced and imagined. This underlined the fact that knowledge is more fluid and changeable, especially among young children, than is often recognised. Importantly, it also became apparent in 'listening' to children as researchers that there is a danger that we only hear certain things, in much the same way a teacher might only listen to children for evidence of specific learning outcomes. This is where audio recordings played a vital role. Listening to the audio revealed elements and meanings in children's ideas that were not clear in real time. The implications of this are significant for both researchers and teachers. For example, how much of children's intelligence do we miss when we only listen in a particular way?

Overall, the term 'listening' came to feel like an inadequate way of describing the research process, given the playfulness and creativity of the research approach. 'Multi-sensory listening', like that described by Clarke (2005), also felt lacking as a term, as such approaches are linked to helping children 'articulate their knowledge'. In contrast, the research endeavoured to use

movement and play to listen to children in ways that allowed the ‘not-yet-known to emerge’ (Davies, 2014). Notions of emergence and intra-activity (Barad, cited in Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2003) came to extend the definition of listening which guided the research: “Listening is about being open to being affected (…) Listening is about not being bound by what you already know. It is life as movement.” (Davies, 2014, p. 1)

A discussion of my role in this research project forms an important conclusion to this account of ethics. This is because of the various blurring positions I assumed across the four different participating schools, and across Study One and Study Two. Words such as teacher, researcher, moderator, participant, observer, and mother figure all feel relevant, yet these labels were not necessarily helpful to my own ‘becoming ethical’. For example, in Study One my relative experience as a teacher compared to my inexperience as a researcher was a persistent source of unease. I worried about appearing too ‘teacherly’ during research activities and I doubted my ability to become an ‘affective’ focus group facilitator. At the same time, I fretted about the potential impact of my so-called ‘insider’ status at the pilot study school. In this way, ethics during Study One was tied painstakingly to sets of competencies and capabilities, and to the negotiation of various pre-existing subject positions that had been imposed upon me. Foucault’s (2000) linking of ethics with governmentality offers an interesting framework through which to augment my worries. His writing reminds us that there are a range of ‘normalising power relations’ (Niesche and Hasse, 2012) at play in the work we do:

"Governmentality implies the relationship of the self to the self, and I intend this concept of governmentality to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize and instrumentalise the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (Foucault, 2000, p. 300).

It was only during Study Two, after I had cast a reflective gaze on myself as a 'socially constructed being' (Giampapa, 2011), that I tried to think of myself not in purely teacher/researcher terms but more of an 'unknown entity', always in the process of "unfolding or folding up, being done or undone, in relation to the other, again and again." (Davies, 2006, p. 436) My positionality was allowed to shift, it was ok to still be learning, and it was good to be vulnerable. It was only when I saw myself in this way that I was more willing to be play with 'the humanist ideals of ethical practice' (Davies, 2006) and to research in a significantly more playful open-ended way. As Davies (2006, p. 435) writes:

"Our responsibility, as educational and social scientists, is to understand, to the extent that is possible, the complex conditions of our mutual formation. We must understand our own contribution to creating and withholding the conditions of possibility of particular lives. We must constantly ask what it is that makes for a viable life and how we are each implicated in constituting the viability or non-viability of the lives of others."

I hope the preceding discussion in which I reflected on my understanding of ethics, elucidates ways in which I became ethical in this project. Rather than withholding 'conditions of possibility' (Davies 2006), Ideas Club felt like a new

way of researching, it felt like an attempt to actively subvert normative research practices and it felt like a space where the children and I could form ourselves out of the not-yet-known. This is not to say that I was entirely annulled of the worries that bound me during Study One, however I feel sure that Ideas Club embodied a more caring, ethical way of researching with children, compared to Study One.

Validity

"*Validity is not just one of many issues in science but the crux of the issue…"* (Lather, 2007, p. 1)

There are no quantitative data, or 'hard facts' in this project, nor did I use randomized controlled trials, statistical analyses or linear models. As a consequence, this project could be perceived as missing the 'external validity' or legitimacy that motivates current research and policy-making (Martin and Kamberelis, 2013). Fortunately, the idea of what constitutes 'valid' work has been put under examination within many fields and as a result other more nuanced understandings of validity can be found, such as those that are underpinned by post-structuralist ideas. Such understandings allow for validity to be recognised within this project, but in a different form to that which is revered in more positivist research approaches. For St Pierre (1995), who described her search for validity as a painful experience, validity is tied in complex ways to an examination 'of one's own frailty', to emotion, and to efforts to move into spaces of understanding she did not necessarily want to occupy:

"In the end, you must take me at my word, and whether and how you do that is undoubtedly beyond my control. I will give it my best, since I care immeasurably for the women of this study. I find my own validity when I write and cry and then write some more." (St Pierre, 1995, p. 114)

St Pierre (1995, 1997) also understood that her search for validity became a method of data collection in the sense that she found herself working much harder to respect the lives of her participants and to question the frames of reference with which she read the world. Perhaps then, there is validity to be found in my attempts to work with Reception children in slower, more playful ways, to not want to coerce them, to want to explore their everyday lives, and to want to remain open to the fact that knowledge wasn't out there to be found, but would likely be generated in unpredictable ways during the study. Helpfully, Lather (1993, 1995, 1997, 2007) has also written extensively about validity: "the conditions of the legitimation of knowledge in contemporary postpositivism" (1995, p. 673), and she admits that her thoughts on the topic are always 'on the move'. Rather than jettison the term altogether, Lather (1993) called for researchers to adopt a kind of transgressive validity that disrupts closed truths of the past and opens up space "for new forms of thought and practice." (p. 676) In similar terms, Lather spoke in 2007 about how validity lies in practices that are "situated, multiple, partial, endlessly deferred." (p.2) My attempts to produce difference rather than sameness, to embrace indeterminacy and to 'think the unthought' in relation to 'school readiness' would suggest I was working with similar notions of validity to Lather (1993, 1995, 1997).

Validity in this project has been understood in one sense as a type of power; a power that can “determine the demarcation between science and not-science” (Lather, 1997) and inhibit the creation of new research methodologies (Freeman *et al*., 2007). It has also been understood as an unresolvable problem (Lather, 1993). Nevertheless, there are elements of my research project that perhaps offer more traditional markers of validity. As an example, my work with teachers and my revisiting of data with Reception children could be read as an effort to triangulate data. By the same token, the variety of methods used across Study One and Study Two might be thought to offer a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study than is possible with a more narrow methodological approach (Webb *et al*., 1966). I have also tried to report decisions and procedures in ways that the reader might find comprehensible. While these practices might offer some reassurances of my attempts to produce ‘valid’, ‘credible’ data they do little to account for the complex ways in which the overall merit of a study can be judged. It is accepted that the data in this project are not pure or raw. It has not produced generalisable, unambiguous solutions to ensuring children’s ‘school readiness’. But hopefully it has generated thought-provoking knowledge relevant to scholars and practitioners, which for Freeman *et al*. (2007) is a more useful way of thinking about the validity of a study.

As part of this process of exploring validity, there appears a need to ‘theorise my own life’ (St Pierre, 1995) and to make my own subjectivity visible (Blaisdell *et al*., 2018). For me, this means setting aside the role of the ‘precise’

researcher and promugulating a construction of a transgressive self that is ‘decentered, situated, and multiply positioned’ (Lenzo, 1995). As Richardson (1993) encouraged, I have tried to be present and honest in this thesis where possible, and to understand myself reflexively “as persons writing from particular situations at specific times" (p. 518). I hope the reader can detect my commitment to self-reflexivity in the description of my journey between Study One and Study Two and in my efforts to admit to naivety and uncertainty during the research process. Making the stylistic choice to include children’s fiction (a passion of mine) as part of my narrative was also an attempt to play with the authority of the ideas I present and to put more of ‘me’ in this thesis. As Lenzo (1995) points out, departing from established thesis-writing in this way perhaps risks the denial of degree-high stakes, but without such transgressions how are such norms to be challenged? And surely everybody’s writing is suspect, not just those who try to do things differently (Richardson, 1993)?

Working *with* Limitations

Standardising methods can offer some direction during the research process, as I found during the planning of Study One. However, too much uniformity can also limit the ways in which researchers attempt to describe the elusive nature of the social world (Law, 2004). As such, my dissatisfaction with the standardisation of methods (and lack of theory) in Study One can be understood as a limitation that motivated me to adapt normative social science methods in creative ways to account for the slipperiness of the ‘school readiness’ concept and the messes of reality. An open-ended playful approach

allowed children to make connections in unexpected ways, resulting in them contributing highly valuable ideas, which challenged received wisdoms about 'school readiness.' Using a playful methodology in Study Two also allowed for multiple expressions of voice and created a more inclusive research experience for the children, particularly as the methods appeared to reflect and respect the children's interests. However, open-ended research cannnot be guaranteed to produce the data a researcher is looking for (Blaisdell *et al*., 2018), particularly if wanting to explore children's perspectives on specific topics. This could be discomforting for researchers used to more traditional methods. Aligning open-ended, playful approaches with the temporal restrictions of Ph.D. research could also be perceived as challenging, and perhaps a limitation of this approach. At the same time, an open-ended approach has the potential to generate a vast and overwhelming amount of data, which needs to be somehow filtered and made sense of to fit within the parameters of a thesis. As such, there will always be lots of 'missing' data - data that might have evoked wonder for others but did not evoke these same emotions for me. Data that was co-constructed with children but then grappled with mainly by adults. What did help during the selection process was to share children's ideas with other people, such as my supervisors. Watching how others grasped and were 'grasped' (MacLure, 2013) by data helped me to see children's ideas anew. Revisiting Study One data with the children six months later was also a very helpful part of this process, however I wish I had drawn more on children's intelligence during the analysis process. In summary, the limitations of Study One could be described as methodological and to some extent conceptual.

Comparably the limitations of Study Two were logistical, relating to limiting the data I could report on in this thesis.

All data captured in this thesis are acknowledged as 'incomplete traces of events' (Hodgins, 2014) rather than a (re)presentation of what really happened. Also, when research is understood as an emergent, complex process, it cannot be replicated. Some might regard these matters as limitations, this study's inability to offer a 'truth' or to be generalisable and applicable outside of the participating settings. However, taking participants' words as a foundational starting point could also be seen as a limitation of qualitative research methods (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p.127). It could equally be said that I worked *the* limitations of emergence and voice during this project: "A recognition of the limits of our received practices does not mean that we reject such practices; instead, we work the limits (and limitations) of them." This chapter has provided details of my research study design and rationale, and the processes of participant selection and data generation. I described my role as a researcher and some of the ethical considerations that were addressed prior to starting the research as well as some that emerged during the study. I also detailed how an understanding of post-structuralist, post-qualitative methodology was put to work in this study, including in the analysis strategy that I followed. Chapters 4 and 5 take up this analysis wherein 'school readiness' is analysed through a selection of children's perfect classroom drawings (from Study One), and through children's entanglements with clay (Study Two). Important to note is that these chapters go beyond 'findings' as

traditionally conceived and they present only a small selection of data from the very rich tapestry that both studies yielded.

CHAPTER 4: CLASSROOMS THAT MATTER

One of my early research aims related to Reception children's ideas about classroom spaces. This is because 'school readiness', when conceptualised as children's move to Year 1 (as in the EYFS, 2017), involves transitioning from a play-based environment to a more formal way of working, not least because the physical layout of Reception classrooms and Year 1 classrooms tend to be very different. Thus, the classroom-drawing task in Study One placed the classroom, and the experience of a classroom under examination. Guided by post-structuralist ideas, my primary goal in this section is to use children's perfect classroom drawings to reimagine classroom life and to destabilise the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1977) that has emerged in recent years in relation to 'school readiness'. Thus, each classroom is thought about as 'an experimentation with the real', and as 'an engine for creative imagining' (de Freitas, 2012).

As described, the following chapter presents children's ideas of a 'perfect classroom'. The children who created these classrooms are not named, even with pseudonyms. This is a deliberate attempt to shift the focus away from the child because I do not want the classrooms to be thought about in terms of individual children, 'for children are not objects that can be known' (St Pierre, 2005). Instead, I would like the reader to look at the classroom and imagine being in it. Each classroom has also been given a name relating to its content such as 'The Shopkins Classroom', which was a classroom presented as full of small collectible toys called 'Shopkins'.

Image 10. "Shopkins" A small collectable toy which inspired an unexpected turn of ideas towards materialism and post-humanism

My decision to name the classrooms in this way is linked to my unexpected turn towards the ideas of New Materiality and post-humanism during the analysis process as prompted by my noticing of the 'wonder and mischief of objects' (Jones *et al*., 2012) in the children's drawings. It is also important to remember my discussion of the classrooms is based upon four overlapping phases of data collection and analysis – initial data collection, initial analysis, discussions with teachers, and discussions with children 6 months later. Throughout the whole process I also drew on my supervisors' thoughts and interpretations.

What is a classroom?

What is a classroom? How might I answer this question if it was asked by Dr Xargle (Willis, 1988), an 'outsider' from another planet? Showing Dr Xargle images from a 'starting school' picture book might help him understand. However, reading such a book would certainly gloss over complexity of such a question.

Image 11. "Do I have to Go to School? A First Look at Starting School (Thomas, 2006)

Using the words of a cultural geographer (such as Ellis, 2005) a classroom could be described to Dr Xargle as a place that shapes and constrains children's everyday lives. With Reggio Emilia, a classroom might also be described as a 'third teacher' because of the way children learn and create meaning there (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007). Yet, Dr Xargle might be most reassured by Edward and Usher's (2000) idea that classrooms are places where aliens already exist, in the form of those who deviate from the norms. In this project, I have come to conceptualise a classroom in several ways. Firstly, a classroom is understood here as a physical place that cannot exist independently without the people that experience it in their everyday lives (Sen and Silverman, 2014). At the same time a classroom is understood as more than a physical container of objects and things; they are seen as spaces which are open, plural, emergent and always under construction (Massey, 2005; Taylor, 2013). The idea that a classroom can be thought of as a space of 'agentic materialities' (Taylor, 2013) also reflects the way children's classroom drawings led me to expand my post-structuralist framework to include ideas

relating to New Materialism and post-humanism. This is because the drawings comprised of lively and risky things (Latour, 2005), not-easy-to-interpret things, such as a tortoise, a clock, a snowman, several fake spiders, a Playstation, and a ‘dancing pineapple’, some of which are depicted in the images presented (Images 12-14). As such, the children’s classroom drawings would not help provide clear answers for Dr Xargle about early years classroom life, not if we think of them as ‘momentary pauses’ (Knight, 2013) They do however, offer new possibilities for disrupting ‘school readiness’, as the proceeding discussion will attempt to elucidate.

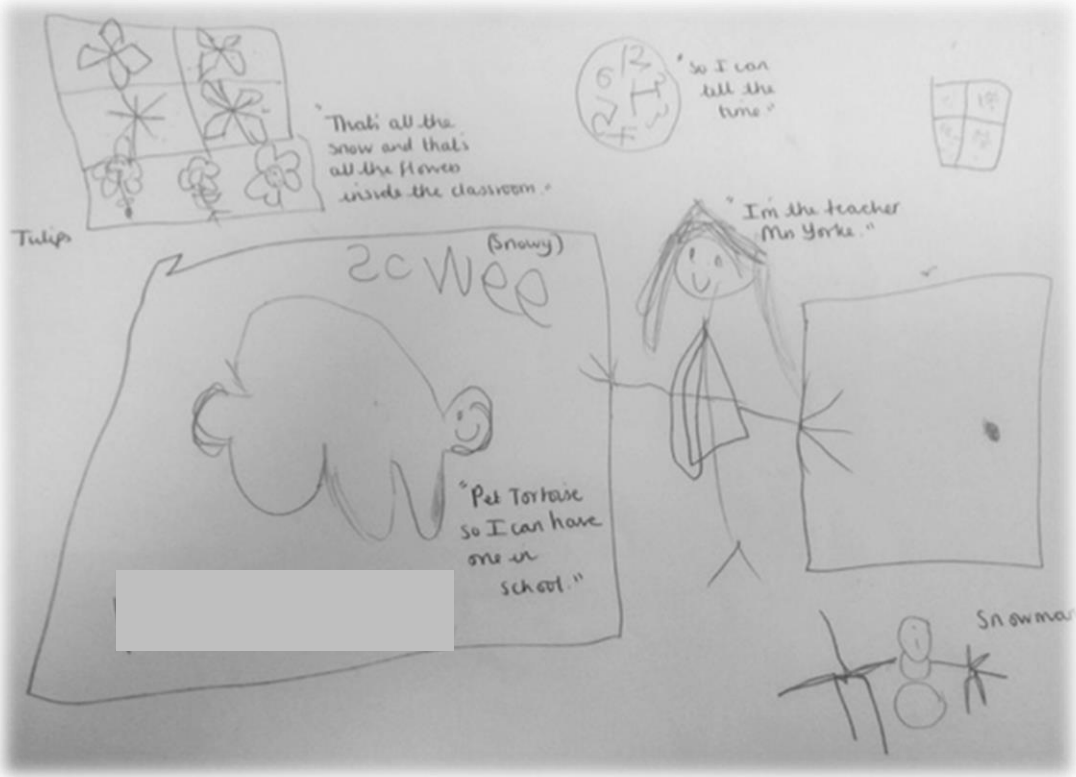


Image 12. The Tortoise Classroom – a classroom with windows, a plant pot, flowers, a sofa, a snowman, a door and a tortoise

***Windows**! So we can see out the **window**, and this is a **plant pot**… just to make it nice. Hmmm, look. This is the **sofa**. This is the **sofa**. I made a **tortoise**! This is the **tortoise** classroom on my classroom. It's **snow** because its' a cold winters day and because it's Christmas. I like Christmas because you get lots of **presents**. And I've drawn a **snowflake**. This is a **snowflake**. Do you like my **snowflake**? Do you like that? This is my **snowflake**… This is the classroom and that's the **door** to get out the classroom. This is the **window** part where everyone can see it snowing outside. This is the **tortoise** bit so the **tortoise** has got a little room and I'm going to draw a **box** and then I'm going to write tortoise. I'm going to write a name for it… Have you been to Blue Dolpins? It's a **camper**, like it's a **campervan** and it's got a **cliff**, but my mum's not going to go on the very end of the cliff or she'll fall off. I'm trying to think of a name for it… This is all my classroom. It's the **tortoise**'s classroom as well. I don't know if it's going to be a boy or a girl. Ah, I haven't drawn me. Where's my **pencil**? Ah there it is! Now I've got a name for it. Snowy! This is where the **tortoise** can play out… This is the part with the four **snowflakes** and the **snow** and these are the **flowers**. That's the **clock** and that the other **window**, just the **snow** and that's one of the **snowflakes**. This is the tortoise called Snowy. It's a snow picture. And there's a **snowman** there, and there's me, and there's the **door** to get out. I'm helping the tortoise get out, I'm opening the **door**… And I've writed my name there. All the children are playing outside. Mr Snowman and Mr Tortoise are in my classroom. I'm the teacher because it's my classroom.*

A re-imagined classroom from Study One

Image 13. 'The Prank Classroom'

The 'Playstation Classroom' (Image 14 and Appendix 9) is presented as an 'opening' to the chapter. Aside from the inclusion of a Playstation, the classroom as a whole feels somewhat familiar and knowable with the presentation of classroom 'areas'. The child's comments and the teacher's comments will be used as part of this discussion. The chapter then will focus in more depth on two classrooms which 'felt' particularly significant to me - 'The Shopkins' Classroom (Image 15, Appendix 10) and the 'Cars Classroom' (Image 17, Appendix 11). During the early stages of my analysis, I 'felt' that these classrooms had the most potential to rupture conversation, and transform thinking. In this way, my decision to include these classrooms is linked to affect, and to the wonder that these classrooms generated during my entanglement with data. As MacLure (2013) argues, "I think we need more wonder in qualitative research, and especially in our engagements with data, as a

counterpart to the exercise of reason through interpretation, classification, and representation."

A conventional reading of children's classrooms might have looked for similarities and differences between the drawings and then offered some interpretations as to why the children had drawn what they had drawn, or how meaning materialised during group interaction. However, my analysis is more concerned with the unpredictable, emergence of ideas and utterances that could not have been foreseen - the kind of ideas that disrupt power within the classroom, and make the research process a more messy, complex, and remarkable experience. By embracing the unpredictable, I wanted to illuminate the shortfalls of working with children in predictable, measured ways. As part of the presentation of Reception children's classroom drawings, my aim is also to use Deleuzian concepts to theorise the character of a classroom, and the possibilities a classroom space can hold. As an example, a school can be understood as space that is experienced in a certain way - beliefs and categories emerge as solid and stable because of its organisational habitus (Roy, 2003). Further to this, when curriculum developers reify an idea as a curricular commodity, such as in the case of 'school readiness' we see the emergence of a molar category, which further inaugurates control. Molar lines in the classroom dictate conformity to institutional structures (Roy, 2003). Similarly, because institutions like schools are segmented (or striated), lines of flight away tend to be temporary and are ultimately recaptured back into the molar system (Strom and Martin, 2013). Equally a classroom can be thought of as a productive, malleable and rihzomatic space in which individual children

and groups can rework reality, and where learning can take place in unusual and discontinuous ways (Roy, 2003). Similarly, the classroom can be seen as a 'what if' space (Handsfield, 2007), where learning at the conscious level is only a small fragment of the learning that actually goes on (Davis *et al.*, 2000). As implied by this discussion, theoretical tools and concepts can help us to remap what is going on in a classroom, and gain a fresh perspective on things, a perspective that helps to move away from the old habits of thought (Roy, 2003). The implication of this approach might be that we open up pedagogical boundaries and new spaces for teacher perception and action (Roy, 2003).

The Playstation Classroom

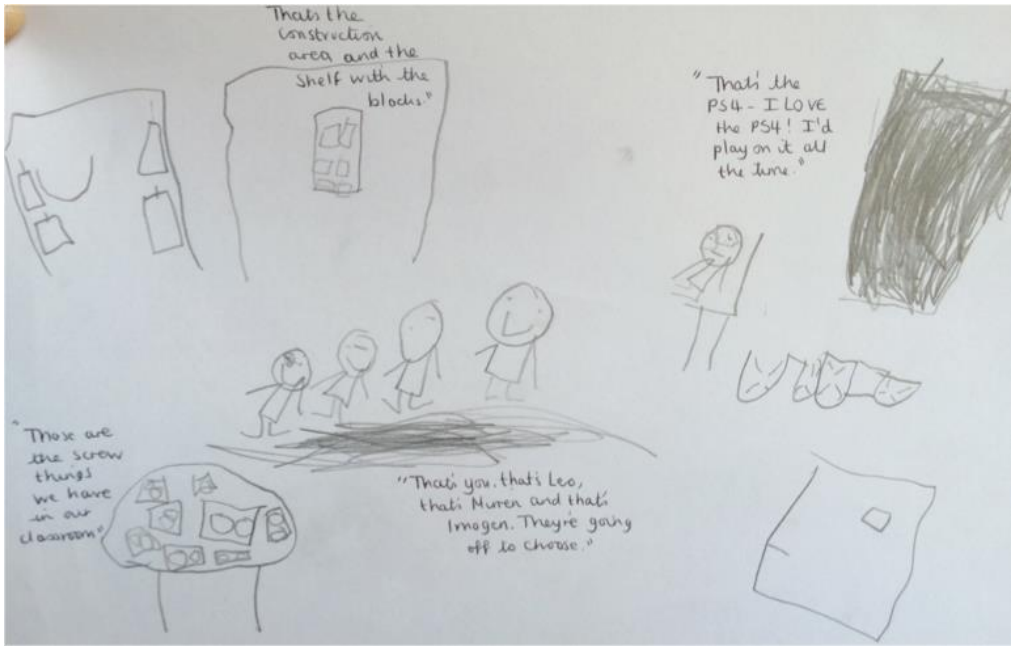


Image 14. The Playstation Classroom.

LH: *(…) why would this classroom make you happy?*

Child: *Because there's loads of games and we just, shall I tell you why w-, why I made you standing up?*

LH: *Why?*

Child: *Because yuh just going off to choose.*

(…)

LH: *And what would be the first thing you would go and choose?*

Child: *It would be the PS4 (…) because I love playing on the PS4 AND the construction area and space area and that.*

Going off to choose

LH: *What is a classroom?* **Child:** *It's a place where you learn things and do playing.* **LH:** *It's a place where you learn things and do playing?* **Child:** *And you write stuff*	**Teacher:** *"That's an Ofsted answer! Good boy!"*

An Ofsted answer

The Playstation Classroom (Image 14) has been selected as a starting point for my discussion about children's 'perfect' classrooms. I chose this classroom because it represents a 'typical' Reception classroom that fits with my own and other teachers' experiences. There is a carpet, there are children, and the children are going off "to choose" (see box above). There is a teacher, there is a chair, and there are areas in which to play. The drawing 'makes sense' as a

'perfect' classroom because it appears to include the child's 'best' parts of their own Reception classroom:

Teacher: *"He's drawn pretty much his classroom. He's created a classroom of his interests."*

Importantly, it is also implied that play *and* learning take place there, an idea that was interpreted by one teacher as the perfect 'Ofsted answer'. A study of the influence of Ofsted inspections in schools (Perry, 2017) offers an interesting framing of this comment, particularly as inspection was not the focus of the original research. As Perry (2017) explains, mention of Ofsted in her study was instigated by the interviewees themselves, "which may reveal the pervading influence of Ofsted in schools" (p. 2). Thus, Perry's (2017) use of phrases 'performing for inspection' and being 'inspection-ready' cast an ominous light on ideas associated with The Playstation Classroom.

Child: *This is my classroom. I'm going to draw the best things in my classroom.*

Child: *This is going to be the um, the space area.*

LH: *Ooo a space area! Why are you having a space area?*

Child: *Cos there <u>IS</u> a space area in my class.*

LH: *There is. You're absolutely right.*

Child: *Look what I drawed! That's the construction area.*

LH: *You've got a construction area in your classroom?*

Child: *And that's the cupboard where the bricks are.*

A classroom of best bits

Seen from a curriculum perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that 'areas of provision' would feature in a Reception child's classroom drawing. Reception classrooms in England are often divided up into specific areas to encourage different types of play, such as for building or painting. This was true of the participating children's classrooms and my own Reception classroom, for I also had role-play and construction areas like those captured in the drawing. Similarities between my own and others' classroom configurations likely reflect the imperative for teachers to adhere to government guidance and to use the EYFS' (DfE, 2017) seven 'areas of learning' to "shape activities and experiences for children in all early years settings" (p. 5). Structured classroom layouts might also represent a comfortable way for teachers to be able to manage early years children and their learning (Comber and Wall, 2001; Hastings and Chantrey Wood, 2002). In summary, it could be inferred that early years classrooms are understood in policy, and by many teachers, in passive ways: as predefined containers for the management of adults, as providing a framework for 'effective learning' (DfES, 2004), and as 'empirical, objective and mappable' (Hubbard *et al*., 2004, p.4). It could also be deduced that early years policy has the effect of producing resemblance and stable classroom systems, where play and learning take place within certain boundaries, keeping mess (metaphorical and otherwise) and uncertainty to a minimum:

"Playtime. Freedom. Not so fast. First the entire class must come to order." (Leonard, 1968, p. 108)

Given the inclusion of particular areas in the ‘Playstation Classroom’, the drawing could be seen as a copy or a ‘tracing’ of something that is already there, based on *a priori* deep structure (Kamberelis, 2004). We might also conclude that the ‘Playstation Classroom’ harbours a kind of ‘arborescent thought’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) (a dominant way of seeing the world) because it does not so obviously ‘shake the tree’ (Leafgren and Bornhorst, 2016) and help us to see ‘school readiness’ differently. Yet, it is also my understanding, using Deleuzian thinking, that ‘repetition is not possible without difference’ (Roy, 2003, p 131), therefore it is important to draw out the complexities and singularities of the ‘Playstation Classroom’ rather than “falling into the trap of believing the same has been produced” (Roy, 2003). Thinking with difference and with Deleuze, we are more likely to take notice of the specific modifications that the creator of the ‘Playstation Classroom’ made to suit their own interests. Perhaps the ‘construction’ and ‘space’ areas hold bodied memories of material entanglements for the child – “we do not know the limits of what is possible for such assemblages to do” (Zembylas, 2007, p.25). We might also wonder how the inclusion of the Playstation 4 sits with our understandings of a classroom and ways in which children’s play experiences are shaped by electronic media:

LH: (…) *if I could grant you one wish, what would you wish for there to be?*

Child: *Computers and PS4s (…) I love PS4 and there’s going to be some games you can play.*

The inclusion of the Playstation is particularly interesting when we consider that console environments have been described as fast-paced, multi-modal and highly interactive (Kearney and Skelton, 2003; Luke, 1999) as well as 'deep and difficult' (Hutchison, 2007 - how far could an early years classroom be also described in these terms? It could also be said that the child's repetition of the word 'love' in connection with the Playstation represents an aspect of education, that of affect and emotion, that does not sit not well with currently established systemic concerns in education, for where does love fit in our pedagogy? By wondering about these things we acknowledge that every small element of classroom life matters (Rose, 1998). The bolt, screws, and blocks of the construction area matter. The carpet matters, as does the teacher who is sitting down and the children who are standing up. The things we *love* matter. When we pay attention to them, they are brought more clearly into view (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2017). When we are less concerned with understanding what is going on, our perceptions become open to fluxes and rhythms (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2017). These points are important because they align with the spirit of my discussion to come, in which I use the ideas of New Materiality theory and the concept of affect to thwart representational, common sense interpretations of the classroom drawings. These points also indicate my commitment to noticing the subtleties or 'small intervals' (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1988) in children's ideas and the potency of these ideas for bringing about minor, almost invisible changes in everyday classroom practice:

"…grand-scale reforms and large structural initiatives, although they may look

impressive, are less important from the point of view of real change than the minor movements of disorientation and dissidence at the micropolitical level… smaller acts of rupture have greater possibility of escaping capture."

Indeed, the point I am making is that the 'Playstation Classroom' should not be overlooked because of its familiarity or its 'Ofsted-friendly' feel, nor should it be examined for grandoise educational changes. Rather, it's a question of extracting its singularity and ways in which the drawing might help us work more critically and reflexively in our classrooms:

"Those of us working within the field of early years education must ensure that we maintain a stance of constant critical questioning, never allowing ourselves to be too comfortable with the landscape we create, or for our practices and understandings to become taken for granted as part of the status quo." (Evans, 2016, p. 75)

As an example, the 'Playstation Classroom' could prompt a teacher to notice the potential of building blocks. Their solidity, their density, their stability, the structured rhythms of doing and undoing which might be present in children's block play (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2017). While such observations might appear insignificant, they have great potential for changing the way we think and act (Roy, 2003). They might also be the kinds of tiny changes that by going undetected can confront more forcefully the practices that have emerged from 'school readiness' discourse, a discourse that likely eliminates the possibility of a Playstation 4 becoming an overtly valued participant in an early years

classroom.

The Shopkins Classroom

"Objects, bodies and spaces do crucial but often unnoticed performative work as vital materialities within the classroom." (Taylor, 2013, p. 47)

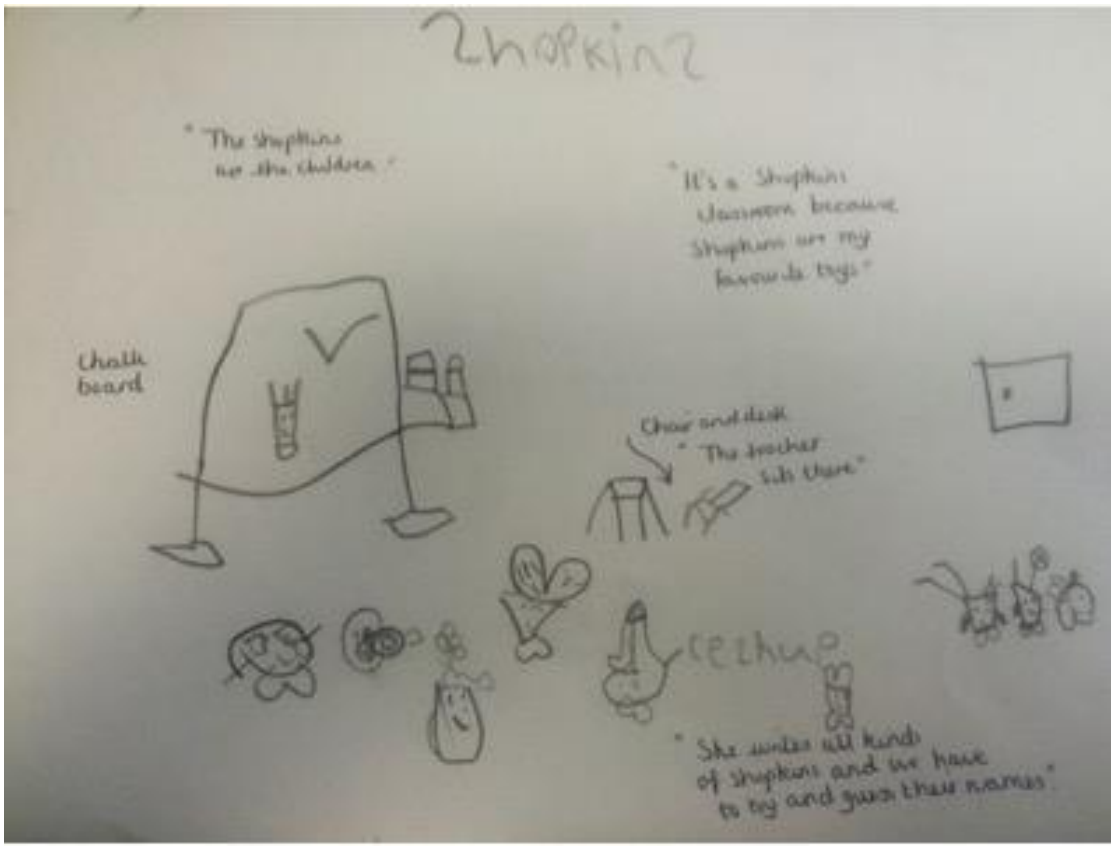


Image 15. The Shopkins Classroom – a classroom where you will find Little Sipper, Berry Smoothie, Apple Blossom and a chalkboard.

Post data collection I expended a great deal of time trying to figure out *how* to analyse my data. I spent much time reading, pondering and looking at the data to try to find direction. And for a long time, I remained clueless. I felt cloudy, foggy and lost at sea. Then one day, weary of over-thinking, I started writing, at

length and at speed, without really knowing where I was going. Without a clear direction my writing felt experimental, exciting and productive. This first deluge of words and thoughts was triggered by my interest in a piece of data from Study One, the Shopkins Classroom (Image 15). This was a classroom drawing that had not captured my attention at the time of the event, but during transcription the words of the child (see below) began to 'glow' and prompt 'wonder' (MacLure, 2013) - what was it about a Shopkin toy that could make one child speak with such passion? And how might a Shopkin unsettle narrow conceptualisations of 'school readiness'?

Excerpts of video transcript compiled in the form of a rolling narrative

We can use our imagination to draw something here? I'm going to draw some Shopkins in mine. Do you know they actually do Jumbo Shopkins now because of some of the playsets? I'm going to write my name on the top. This is a chalkboard. I am going to put in Shopkins. I have Shopkins at my house. I'm in the hundreds with my Shopkins. They're things in categories, that have faces but they're smaller than Barbie dolls. My dad collects rock food. He collects sticks of rock. This is a chalkboard, a pen and a rubber. It's just like a whiteboard, but whiteboards are white, and blackboards are black. She can write the date on and who's off… with the pen… Look at that tiny door! A door! It looks like a mouse door! Are you going to do cheeky cherries? Do you know I'm actually going to draw Little Sipper. She's a little drink. She's cute. I'm doing, I'm doing some… That is Berry Smoothie. I'm still drawing my Shopkins, because I like Shopkins. Shopkins are my favourite. I'm going to do more Shopkins. That's Apple Blossom by the way. Apple Blossom. I love Shopkins

so I'm going to do 100 Shopkins. There's a desk for the teacher. Shopkins would be in my classroom. It's going to be a Shopkins classroom! That's why it's got a tiny door! There's just all kinds of Shopkins. There are no people because it's a Shopkins classroom. It's a Shopkins school! They're so cute and they're only that small. But, by the way, she has not got that long straws. I'm going to draw a berry on. I'm doing Sadie Soccerball. This is Sadie Soccerball, she's from Season 5. These two are from Season One and that's from Season 4. These two are just friends Season Two and three, and that one is friends Season 4 and that one is friends Season 5! I have them at my house. This is NOT a snail, this is Whitney. I'm not done yet. I'm trying to finish all my Shopkins that I want to do. I haven't got Sadie Soccerball yet. I'm going to finish it off.

The Shopkins Classroom Narrative

Indeed, the drawing prompted me to wonder about the place of children's interests and popular culture in the early years and Year 1. The intensity of the child's interest in Shopkins also made me wonder about the relationship between children and 'things', and how far we value this relationship in Year 1 and beyond. And so with the Shopkins Classroom as my inspiration I took a journey through several research areas, including the field of New Materialism, a theoretically diverse field of work that is united in its insistence on the significance of materiality in social and cultural practices (MacLure, 2013; Hein, 2016). As Ansell-Pearson (2017, p. 4) further explains:

"What is taken to constitute the 'new materialism' is typically said to question the privilege given to the human being in the human/nonhuman binary, along

with the emphasis on mind and subjectivity and the construal of matter as passive and inert, so at the core of this latest turn in theory is a preoccupation with the agential properties of matter itself."

Analysing the Shopkins Classroom through this lens led me to see other pieces of data in new ways and to further question human-centred perspectives. Thus, my starting point became a middle, from which many lines of flight opened up, and from which an analytical framework evolved. In retrospect, given the highly material nature of my Study Two approach, including ideas from the New Materialism in was perhaps not such an unlikely turn of events.

Children's Interests

During my early attempts at analysing the data from Study One, I noted 'children's interests' as a significant theme. Under this umbrella term I logged very broad areas of children's interest such as play and animals, and more specific interests such as Shopkins, as captured in one classroom drawing. An interest in fidget spinners was also observable during Study Two, therefore 'fidget spinners' could have been added under this same heading. At first I intended to use this theme to sort and bring order to the copious amounts of data collected during Study One and Two, but instead I have used the theme to complicate matters, by considering the ways that 'children's interests' are interpreted and drawn on in approaches to curriculum. The Shopkins Classroom (Image 15), and teachers' comments about the drawing are used as the main stimulus for this discussion:

Teacher: *She's so focused on her interests.*

Teacher: *What a great bit of expertise and do we ever value that?*

Teacher: *The fact that she can get so absorbed in something, if she's got those skills with it, then if she's doing her work and if she gets totally absorbed in a similar way, then she'll get a lot out of it.*

I begin by exploring the place of children's interests in early years curricula and the significance of several claims made by other researchers in relation to interest: that interest is often written about as an 'atheoretical concept' (Birbili & Tsitouridou, 2008, p. 143); that the pedagogical imperative of children's interest is an invisible form of governance (Olsson, 2009), and that not all children's interests deserve to 'be strengthened by the serious attention of the teacher' (Katz and Chard, 1998). These claims are used to support my view that 'school readiness' agendas limit ways in which interests such as Shopkins 'matter'. I then expand my discussion by aligning the topic of children's interests with research in the fields of popular culture, New Materialism and aesthetics. This will include considering ways in which popular culture 'matters' in children's everyday lives (Horton, 2010). Overall, my aim is to seek out diverse and dynamic conceptualisations of children's interests, as inspired by the Shopkins Classroom.

Children's interests are recognised as crucial to meaningful learning in the early years (Chesworth, 2016; Carr *et al*., 2016). This is most likely because of the positive links that have been made between interest and children's intrinsic motivation (Birbili and Tsitouridou, 2008; Hedges and Cooper, 2016), a

connection that was given importance by Dewey (1913) in his work *Interest and Effort in Education*. Children's interests therefore function as a common underpinning for early childhood curricula (Hedges and Cooper, 2016) including in the EYFS framework (DfE, 2017), where it is suggested that practitioners should use children's interests to help shape children's learning experiences:

"Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and stage of development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all of the areas of learning and development." (DfE, 2017, p. 7)

For this reason, the EYFS (DfE, 2017) could be seen in positive terms as a 'child-centred education' and as endorsing the use of interest in Shopkins for the planning of classroom activities. The focus on children's interests might also be interpreted as a positive way of offsetting content-driven outcomes that meet 'school readiness' agendas (Hedges and Cooper, 2015). Nevertheless, the EYFS framework (DfE, 2017) uses developmentally appropriate standards to assess Reception children, so there are tensions associated with attempts to align children's interests with nationally imposed learning goals and the consequent controlling of play (Wood 2014, Cheswick, 2016). These concerns indicate that a child's interest in Shopkins might well be used as a mean to an end, and a method to reach 'school readiness' goals.

Several authors (Birbili and Tsitouridou, 2008; Hedges and Cooper, 2015; Cheswick, 2016) have argued that the notion of children's interests is highly

under-theorised, and without a conceptual framework, “there is a risk of recognising and responding to children’s interests in narrow and unsystematic ways” (Hedges and Cooper, 2015, p. 2). As an example, interest might only be interpreted as children’s engagement in observable play choices within the classroom - choices that are often implicitly controlled by adults, based on their ‘professional knowledge’ about play-based learning (Hedges and Cooper, 2015; Cheswick, 2016; Wood, 2004). This kind of understanding can trivialise children’s interests (Bereiter, 2002), and limit the extent to which interests are situated within the sociocultural practices of the home, classroom and community (Cheswick, 2016; Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011; Hedges 2015). For this particular child, this would have meant that the classroom choices available to her were not reflective of her interest in Shopkins for they are a part of her wider experience. In drawing on these concerns, it is possible to infer that while children’s interests appear a laudable pedagogical imperative, their role in the classroom is highly complex, particularly when we consider post-structuralist critiques, which claim that child-centred approaches are a form of social control and governance (Walkerdine, 1990; Olsson, 2009). For this reason exploring the child’s interest, and its place in the classroom has been a similarly complex endeavour. ‘Plugging into theory’ has been a way of dealing with this complexity and taking my discussion further.

Several researchers (Cheswick, 2016; Hedges and Cooper, 2015) have made their own attempts to theorise interest and to stimulate a shift from psychological to sociocultural interpretations. Cheswick (2016), for example, theorised children’s interests as “a desire to connect with and reconstruct

meaning from the sociocultural activities, values and practices of the communities to which they belong" (p. 2). This involved applying 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et al*., 1992) to engage with the proposition that children's interests arise from everyday engagement in family, classroom and community activities (Cheswick, 2016). Based on her research findings, Cheswick (2016) concluded that a 'funds of knowledge' lens could lead to an increased sensitivity to the meanings that children ascribe to their play. Hedges and Cooper (2015) discussed the 'funds of knowledge' construct in similar positive terms, suggesting that the construct offers a deeper, 'more analytical' interpretation of children's interests, which in turn could help promote a range of life-long learning dispositions, some of which they acknowledge, are linked to 'school readiness' (Hedges and Cooper 2015). Overall, these attempts to theorise interest invite reconsideration of what is involved within children's interests that go beyond what is immediately observable in their choices of play.

Research that has theorised children's interests using the funds of knowledge construct is useful to consider in relation to the Shopkins Classroom. It could be said that a child's interest in Shopkins is representative of funds of knowledge amassed from her everyday engagement in the activities of the home, including popular culture. This was evident during the drawing process when she made reference to home culture, such as the ritual of collecting things - "*My dad collects rock food."* (Meaning sticks of rock). The funds of knowledge construct is also useful to consider in light of one comment about the Shopkins Classroom offered by a teacher, as she hints that the child has knowledge that might not be valued by the school curriculum:

Teacher: *What a great bit of expertise and do we ever value that?*

This statement goes some way to supporting the claim that while children's homes are rich in funds of knowledge, their great potential as a classroom resource is rarely drawn upon by teachers (Moll, *et al*., 1992). This is perhaps because interpretations of children's interests tend to emphasise children's individual engagement with materials or activities within the play environment (Carr, 2008; Hedges, 2011). Such issues raise pertinent questions in relation to the Shopkins Classroom; how might teachers draw on the rich resource that is a child's knowledge of Shopkins? What might they have discovered about the child's play during the Reception year had they used the funds of knowledge construct? Or would a child's knowledge and interest in Shopkins have been used in ways to promote 'positive outcomes' and 'learning dispositions' (as identified by Hedges and Cooper, 2015). In consideration of this concern, I have chosen not to use the funds of knowledge concept to 'delve deeper', such as to look more closely for what Shopkins 'symbolise in a child's life experiences' (Hedges and Cooper, 2015). Instead I am keen to theorise interest using the Deleuzian concept of affect. My attempts to do so have involved becoming attuned to the complex way popular culture 'practically and materially' matters in children's everyday lives (Horton, 2010).

Popular Culture

Image 16. Shopkins and Fidget Spinners emerged as matters of popular culture in Study One and Study Two

I could have used the phrase 'popular culture' together with 'children's interests' to indicate a significant theme that emerged in this research, as prompted by the child's interest in Shopkins, and other children's comments, some of which emerged during Ideas Club:

Child: *When we get in Ideas Club, I'll let you have a go of my golden fidget spinner.*

However, naming and defining elements of the data as 'popular culture', immediately invokes particular meanings, and thus, the phrase cannot be used lightly. Existing meanings of popular culture touch on notions of creation and consumption (Alvermann and Hong Xu, 2003) and link to young children as the everyday texts, artefacts and practices that appeal to them in their masses (Kenway and Bullen, 2003). Alternatively, some researchers, including those working in the field of education (Marsh, 2005, Vasquez, 2005) foreground production rather than consumption as a starting point for their research. These researchers (Marsh, 2005, Vasquez, 2005) highlight the 'good' that can come

from using children's cultures in the classroom, as well as the agency of the child:

"(…) it is important to note that culture is also produced, not simply consumed. Although children's culture is often shaped by adults and taken up by children (or not, as the case may be) in various ways, children also create their own child-centred cultural practices." (Marsh, 2005, p. 3)

Such research has been positioned as a contribution to ongoing debates about the role of popular culture in the education of the young, much of which (Dyson, 1997; Vasquez, 2005; Marsh, 2005; Marsh and Millard, 2000) confronts the habitual rejection of popular culture from the official school curriculum. These tensions make research in this area a particularly complicated and compelling pursuit (Dyson, 1997). The exclusion of popular culture from school has been linked to teachers' discomfort for products on the mass market, and their 'seductive force' in young children's lives (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Such a view indicates that popular culture is often perceived as a 'monolithic giant' capable of consuming small 'powerless children' (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh's, 2002). Perhaps even more interesting is the claim that popular cultural texts and phenomena (often described as 'crazes' or 'sensations') are underrepresented, even in research attentive to popular culture (Horton, 2010, 2012, 2018). For Horton, (2010, 2012, 2018) such research has given close attention to meaning, impact and identity-formation, at the expense of documenting the complex way that popular culture *matters,* affects, and is inseparable from children's everyday lives. With this critique in mind, I have

explored directly the elements of popular culture that were invoked in Reception's children's conversations, as a way of taking seriously the small, banal (yet affective) events and practices that 'mattered', and likely still 'matter' to the children involved in Study One and Two of this project.

Certainly this research could be seen as a contribution to ongoing debates about the value of using popular culture in the classroom. This is because several Reception children invoked elements of popular culture in their classroom drawings and in conversations during Study Two. As part of this contribution, I could have drawn on James' (1998) work to look for ways in which the Reception children used popular culture to 'establish their own integrity' and childhood culture (p. 404). I might also have used teachers' responses to the Shopkins Classroom as a prompt for considering how popular culture could be used to foster or assess particular skills, such as children's ability to become *"absorbed in something"*, or to use "*really good language"*, as interpreted by the teachers. However, using such frames of reference was not in keeping with my efforts to disrupt taken-for-granted ways of thinking about education and 'school readiness'. As an alternative, I have drawn on the children's ideas, and the research of Horton (2010, 2012, 2018) to become attuned to the affecting, complex place of popular culture in children's lives. I have also connected the children's ideas with a discussion about the 'wonder and mischief' of objects (Jones *et al*., 2012) and to the ability of objects to carry 'the today-ness' of children's lives (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010). Once again, the Shopkins classroom will be used as the main stimulus for this exploration.

Shopkins Matter

The work of Horton and Kratl (2006) was a useful point of reference in Chapter 3, when I described my interest (and theirs) in the small, mundane moments and events of Reception children's everyday lives. For similar reasons I turn to several other studies by Horton (2008, 2010) to support my discussion of the affecting, material quality of popular culture phenomena, the likes of which appear to be consumed, in ordinary, everyday ways. As a specific example, Horton (2010) reflected upon the significance of a popular cultural event - the release of an S Club 7 CD single. While Horton (2010) could have critiqued the phenomena for its representational content, or explored its potential for creative agency, Horton (2010) perceived that this event 'practically and materially' mattered to the children in ways that were more urgent and very different 'than any of that.' In this sense, Horton's (2010) work has helped me to move beyond meaning, to explore how Shopkins 'matter', because like the children in Horton's study (2010), the creator of the drawing did not necessarily talk about Shopkins in terms of what they 'meant' to her. Instead she talked about them with intensity, care and emotion:

"I love Shopkins"

Shopkins are mass-manufactured products, comprised of a series of collectable items. They are the kind of items that authors (Horton, 2010; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002) perceive as having been ignored in studies of popular culture, perhaps because of their perceived 'fun, faddish and lowbrow' nature

(Horton, 2010). However, like the children in Horton's (2010) study the child appeared to have had an 'affective gut reaction' to the Shopkins, and some of the idiosyncratic details in her narrative help to support this reading. She 'loves' Shopkins. They are her favourite toys, they are small and cute and they are *her* Shopkins. Like the children in Horton (2010)'s study who spent time drawing the S Club 7 band, the 'perfect classroom' task provided an opportunity to draw Shopkins, their importance constituted by her naming of the classroom – "*it's going to be a Shopkins classroom"*. The child was also able to list in detail the Shopkins' names and some of their key characteristics – a terminology that made her appear an expert. In fact, her tenacious naming of Shopkins made the process of transcription very hard, for the words sounded alien to me. I had to keep replaying the video, and then googling names of Shopkins characters to check that I had heard her correctly.

"I'm in the hundreds with my Shopkins"

The children in Horton's (2010) study detailed the considerable extent of their 'stuff'. Similarly, exaggeration was used to describe the number of Shopkins owned. Perhaps this was a way of highlighting the extent of her collection. She certainly appeared very proud of it. However, it is also true that there are literally hundreds of Shopkins to collect, which is probably why the manufacturers have organised them into categories and seasons. Interestingly, from this account it would seem that the 'categories' and 'seasons' associated with Shopkins were

important in producing affects and attachments to these objects – *"These two are from Season 1 and that's from Season 4 (…) These two are just friends from Season 2 and 3, and that one is friends Season 4 and that one is friends Season 5!* I would suggest they further helped the child assert her expertise.

"I also like Pokemon"

It is not clear from the child's account how the Shopkins served as 'actants' in her everyday life. Did she play with them? Did they help her to relax at home? We also do not know if this love of Shopkins extended into her actual classroom, as opposed to the imagined classroom she drew in the 'perfect classroom' task. We can only presume given the intensity of the child's account that Shopkins were encountered and enjoyed as part of her everyday life. Drawing on Horton's (2010) findings, perhaps she enjoyed Shopkins within the context of other ongoing activities and interests, perhaps in intermittent, 'whilst doing other things kind of way'. Indeed, six months later, the same pupil mentioned a new interest - *"I also like Pokemon. Chloe was the one who introduced me to them"* – suggesting that her interests played out alongside each other and with friends.

"It was a classroom with Shopkins because they're my favourite toys".

I would suggest that these Shopkins were loved in the kind of affective way that cannot fully be comprehended. Nevertheless, I do appreciate a little of the child's account because of similarities that exist between my own childhood

practices and hers. Her account reminded me of the pleasure I experienced in collecting a range of toys called ‘Puppy in my Pocket’ when I was a child. These were small plastic dogs, which came with their own Top Trumps style card. I can remember some of their names – Sacha, Hannah and Joy – and the act of lining them up on my bedroom carpet to marvel at my collection. Fleetingly, these ‘Puppy in my Pockets’ were the ‘the best thing ever’. And yet interests such these cannot be trivialized as fleeting given that ‘this stuff’ lives on in our memories and nostalgia (Horton, 2010). Indeed, Shopkins were still important to the child six months later, when she fondly recollected the details of her classroom and chose to add a ‘Shopkins playground’ to her original drawing:

“It was a classroom with Shopkins because they’re my favourite toys. I’m in the fifty hundreds now. Peachy, Cheeky Cherries, Wild Carrot. That’s Cherry Tomato by the way. That’s a desk and a seat. A Shopkin could go up and learn about Shopkins World. I’d like to add some outdoor stuff. This is a Shopkins playground. Two are playing outside for a treat ‘cos they worked hard. I was thinking I could do more desks. Look my lines have got much straighter. I’m doing some books on the tables so the students are learning. I’m drawing a disco-ball for a disco!”

Such comments certainly offer some interesting points for reflection in terms of children’s transition to Year 1 because of the addition of books, extra desks and a playground (for hard working Shopkins). Do these additions support the idea that children experience a noticeable change in pedagogy between Reception

and Year 1? Relatedly, children's classroom ideas prompted Reception teachers to talk about the realities of children's transition to Year 1:

"It's a lot more formal. They want bums on seats."

"With the best will in the world you can't get away from the fact that the Year 1 staff are judged on reading, writing and maths."

The impression given here is that there will be no time for Shopkins in Year 1.

Vibrant, Lively Shopkins

Horton (2010) attempted to trace the things that 'matter' to children. Consequently I have asserted that Shopkins 'mattered' to this child. Horton (2010) also suggested that S Club 7 'mattered' to the children because of the material nature of the phenomena, which led children to the everyday practices of gathering 'stuff'. With this point in mind, I will now further explore a body of theory called New Materiality as a way of diversifying understandings of children's interests beyond 'child-centred' ways of seeing. Using a New Materiality lens there is no ontological hierarchy when thinking about objects and subjects (Bennett, 2010); both humans and objects hold the capacity of agency to transform each other (Barad, 2007; Lenz-Taguchi, 2014). In this way, theories of New Materialism move beyond the discursive, and urge the legitimation of new perspectives (Tesar and Arndt, 2016), such as seeing educational spaces as 'more-than-human networks' (Fenwick and Edwards,

2011). As an implication, the child is no longer the 'main character' or the main meaning of my analysis and Shopkins are no longer seen as inert man-made objects with which children merely have interest. Instead, Shopkins are thought of as 'vibrant, lively things' (Bennett, 2010), with their own potential to become 'alive, political, and agentic' (Tesar and Arndt, 2016), and children are seen as 'followers of action' initiated by their material surroundings (Rautio, 2013). I would argue that this shift in perspective reflects the child's own inclination to decentre human characters in the classroom: "*There are no people because it's a Shopkins classroom."*

Drawing on 'New Materialism' appears to offer new possibilities for rethinking the relationship between children and their environments. This is explicated in the work of Merewether (2018) who spent a year exploring outdoor spaces in an early years setting. Initially, Merewether (2018) set out to observe the way in which children (seen as active subjects) responded to and acted on 'things' in outdoor spaces. At this time Merewether (2018) was guided by her years of teaching experience observing children, and by theory that sees children as 'social constructors of knowledge'. However, Merewether (2018) soon realised that her human-centric perspective was not adequate in helping her deal with the data, and the way in which the children in her study refused to see outdoor elements such as puddles, bamboo, bricks and drains as inanimate. In effect, the children triggered Merewether (2018) to find a new way to look at her data, and to expand the post-structuralist framework within which her project was originally conceived. The way Merewether (2018) was led by the children to think with 'New Materialism' resonates somewhat with my own journey, as I too

feel that it was the children that, rather poignantly, led me to focus less on them and more so on the materials, which helped bring forth their ideas and intelligence.

In the teachers' comments about the Shopkins Classroom it is possible to discriminate the habitual anthropocentric lens that Merewether (2018) describes. The Reception teachers appeared attentive to the child's words and their behaviour, absorption and expertise, without much consideration for the Shopkins themselves. Of course, this is perhaps not surprising, given that experienced early years teachers are in effect, 'humanist-trained' to observe children (Merewether, 2018). Observation is also considered key to helping early years teachers produce a 'well-rounded' profile of a child's 'readiness for the Year 1' (DfE, 2017):

"Assessment plays an important part in helping parents, carers and practitioners to recognise children's progress, understand their needs, and to plan activities and support (…) It involves practitioners observing children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles, and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations." (p. 13)

Teachers are thus required to put children at the centre of their gaze and for this reason it could well be tricky for them not to see the children in preference to, and as separate from, the surroundings (Merewether, 2018). I also found 'thinking with Shopkins', a strange pursuit, given my 'teacherly' inclination to

focus on the child. However, it has been invigorating to see the data and Shopkins in this way, both in terms of my own practice and for thinking about 'school readiness': What if we spent more time paying attention to the objects that children's use and how they might support the 'serious business of learning' (Jones *et al*., 2012)? What if we stopped 'arresting' objects at the classroom door and chose to explore them for their potential instead? My use of the word 'arrest' here is borrowed from Jones *et al*. (2012, p. 9) who considered why some objects from home are often separated from their owners on entry to the classroom:

"(…) objects are implicated in the social and moral order of the school. Seemingly inert, their arrest at the threshold of the classroom suggests that they have a lively potential for causing trouble on a variety of fronts – pedagogic, emotional, and social."

Tellingly, Jones *et al*. (2012) also suggest that objects when perceived as 'potential agitators', do not sit comfortably with the EYFS guidance (DfE, 2017) where there is an emphasis on 'taking turns' and 'sharing fairly'. For objects to be embraced in the classroom, teachers would also have to accept that the value of 'matter' is highly complex and likely to remain hidden (Franzén, 2015; Rautio, 2013).

The purpose of this discussion is to consider how 'New Materialism' could expand narrow conceptions of children's interests in which they are seen as a means to an end. Usefully, Franzén (2015) used the Swedish curriculum as a

context for a similar discussion. This is because a goal for pre-school quality in Sweden is for children's own interests and intentions to be the basis for organisation and planning. While this might appear a worthy ambition, Franzén (2015) argues that the Swedish curriculum, like in many other countries, has adopted a linear one-dimensional view of the learning process, in which teachers act as 'guides' rather than 'companions', directing children's interests down predictable, goal-orientated paths. As a contrast, Franzén (2015, p. 46) advocates a broader multidimensional view of learning, in which the 'material' is also used as a teacher. This approach requires teachers to slow down and to let go of control, accepting that that there are several influencing factors of children's learning:

" (…) it is not only the child's thinking and language that affect the learning situation. Instead, the environment in the preschool, teachers, peers, surrounding objects, the body and emotions are also viewed as participants in the creation of meaning in a specific situation."

In effect, teachers must accept that objects and the environment are important constructors of knowledge (Barad, 2007; Franzén, 2015), and ideally, this should be taken into consideration when organising the everyday activities of a classroom. However, this is likely to be a significantly more difficult pursuit for Year 1 teachers, who tend to work in environments where there is less opportunity for slowing down, as one teacher hinted at during our classroom drawing discussions - *"It's so fast paced – lesson, lesson, lesson, lesson. There's a little bit of choosing built in."*

Rautio's (2013) research exploring the autotelic practices of children could help to provide an additional distinctive reading of the value of interest. This is because Rautio (2013) relied on a framework of post-humanism relational/new materialism to discuss the complex and immeasurable value of children carrying stones. For Rautio (2013) an autotelic practice is an enjoyable activity that is an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Linked to this, Rautio (2013) describes stones as having 'intra-agency' – they invite a passer-by to pick them up, to hold them, to throw them and to carry them around; essentially they help us to engage in the present. Thus, what I have gleaned from Rautio's (2013) discussion is that teachers should not squander their time thinking about why interests such as Shopkins matter in the 'long run' because their value is not instrumental. Instead, teachers might trust that these interests have value of an intrinsic, rewarding and grounding nature. Like the stones, perhaps Shopkins invite children to play, think certain thoughts and 'become certain kinds of bodies' (Rautio, 2013). Perhaps they 'prop up children's learning' (Jones *et al*., 2012) in the very broadest and unfathomable of senses. Perhaps Shopkins also help children to enjoy the 'magical solace' of the present (Jones *et al*., 2012), rather than be concerned for their future, a point that feels particularly important in light of the following view about 'school readiness':

"Ultimately the risk in binding ECE (Early Childhood Education) and schooling more closely together is not just about the power of schools and their agendas. It derives from a set of cultural related problems. *The first can best be described*

as losing the present to the future – the very problem with school readiness as the central goal of ECE." (Halpern, 2013, p. 11)

And therein lies the reason why Shopkins 'matter' to this project, because practices like these bear no relation to children's future productivity or economic worth (Rautio, 2013). They can be carried out without adult support, direction or acceptance (Rautio, 2013). We also cannot predict what happens when children carry Shopkins around. Taking these practices seriously could therefore be used to rupture and confuse educational practices (such as those relating to 'school readiness') that seek to control the future (Popkewitz, 2000) and develop a particular kind of human subject (Rautio, 2013).

It is important to point out that research in the field of New Materialism tends to analyse interactions between children and matter, such as in Merewether's (2018) research when she examined the blurring boundaries between subjects and object, children and puddle. During Study One, I did not observe any children playing with Shopkins, I only observed them being drawn and talked about. I also did not play the video recording back to look more closely at the material nature of the event, such as children's intra-action with pencils and paper. For this reason, perhaps I cannot wholly conceptualise an interest in Shopkins from the perspective of 'New Materialism'. Nevertheless, the field of New Materialism has helped me to question how far 'school readiness' limits what we turn to notice in school environments. Using these theories, I would assert that the event of drawing Shopkins was part of a larger assemblage of objects, bodies, things and matter, which traversed the porous boundaries of

home and school. It is a child's contact with Shopkins at home that shaped what happened in the event. The addition of new bodies (myself) and tools (e.g. the video camera) will also have further complicated and shaped the research event. This entanglement of body and matter created something, which in this case was a drawing of a Shopkins classroom. The blank paper, the pencil, the invitation to create a 'perfect classroom' caused the child to respond. Shopkins were then placed into the centre of the event; they appear lively and vibrant, even though they are not physically there. They appear to give children confidence and knowledge. They appear to have generated a voice - a voice 'which is always more and other than the sum of the individual (human) subjects' (Rautio and Jokinen, 2016, p. 8). And perhaps most importantly, the Shopkins also produced a productive encounter. A productive encounter that afforded new ways to analyse my data, see children, and challenge 'school readiness',

Aesthetic Interest - "It's a Shopkins school! They're so cute and they're only <u>that</u> small"

In this closing section, I think with aesthetics and the work of Saito (2007) to reimagine a Shopkin as an aesthetic object. Theorising interest in terms of aesthetics feels apt when we remember that the child described Shopkins as 'cute' and 'small'. Her description intimates that the ways these figures look are part of their appeal. It might also be, that it was these aesthetic qualities that prompted the child 'towards action' (Saito, 2007), to purchase, to collect and to draw Shopkins, as in the 'perfect classroom' task. Interestingly, in his book, *The*

Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life, Leddy (2012) points out that aesthetic terms such as 'pretty' and 'cute' are often seen in negative unsophisticated terms, yet they are a part of everyday experience. To further emphasise its non-trivial nature, 'cuteness' has been described as an 'elicitor of play' (Sherman and Haidt, 2011) and 'a powerful affective' register:

"The desire to enter, if only for a moment, into a state of being that renders the world unthreatening and playful comprises a compelling link between the aesthetics of cute and cute affect." (Dale *et al*., 2016)

We could therefore infer that cuteness is a factor that gives Shopkins (and other objects) an 'aura' (Leddy, 2012), and thus facilitates an affective interest. It could also be, as garnered from Dale *et al.*'s (2016) discussion, that the value of these objects is linked not to progress in learning or targets, but to helping children manage the complexities of life, including those associated with neoliberal policy agendas such as 'school readiness'. While it was never my intention to become fully entangled in the field of aesthetics, I draw on these ideas to highlight the complex, messy way in which we experience the world, and the affective, 'aura'-like qualities of objects and matter, as emphasised in the field of Mew Materialism. I also draw on these ideas because it is interesting that researchers working in the field of aesthetics have, like geographers Horton and Kraftl (2006) come to see 'everydayness' as a site of serious consideration. As art educator Duncum (1999) points out:

"It follows that everyday aesthetics are more influential structuring thought, feelings and actions than the fine arts precisely because they are everyday. It is because they are so ordinary that they are so significant." (p. 299)

Thus, what Duncum (1999) is suggesting is that it is at the level of the everyday and the ordinary where most learning takes place. The implication here is that teachers should acknowledge that unlike their relationship to curricula they do not always have greater knowledge than children (Duncum, 1999). They might also accept that children's everyday life knowledge is not always gleaned from sources of the authoritative 'teacherly' kind (Duncum, 2003) but from a kind of "informal education that children undergo on their own*"* (Rautio, 2013, p. 401). Teachers could therefore spend more time talking to children, looking over their shoulders, and 'being there' with them in these everyday moments (Duncum, 1999, 2003; Schulte, 2013; Thompson, 2009) - an act that could be perceived as a subtle resistance to the clock-watching policy-driven practices (Bates, 2019) that dominate school environments.

Concluding Thoughts

This part of my analysis has been concerned with thinking about the Shopkins Classroom, a classroom that doesn't really feel or look like a classroom at all. Where are the traditional 'learning objects' (Zuckerman, 2006) that are universally seen in Western classrooms? Where are the objects that allow children to 'play out their adult futures' (Jones *et al*., 2012)? Where are the children? Where are the teachers? Instead the bulk of the drawing features a

collectible toy known as a Shopkin, an object that might disturb ‘school ready’ narratives within which we want to inscribe the child. This drawing therefore nudged me to explore a problematic concept – children’s interests – and to consider how far they are really valued in the classroom. I also was led to think about things that *matter* to children, and the vibrant, lively nature of objects with which children intra-act. I have wondered about the kind of magical, untraceable work that these objects might do in the classroom and how far they might help us “make connections across the domains of home, community, and school” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p. 16). It has certainly been exciting to wonder about objects in this way, and I hope to welcome more of them into my own classroom spaces in the future.

The Cars Classroom

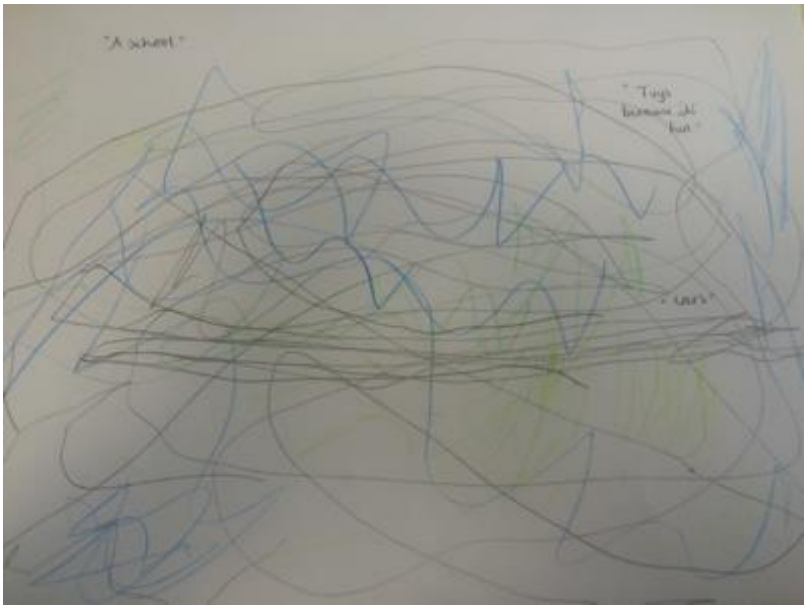


Image 17. The Cars Classroom – A place of cars and toys. Perhaps a place of chaos too.

In keeping with my rhizomatic way of working with data, the field of aesthetics prompted me to move my analysis, unexpectedly, from the Shopkin Classroom to another classroom drawing (Image 17). This is the drawing that I included as part of my methodology chapter (Chapter 3) to indicate the way I was inspired to take a more playful, messy approach to my second study. The reason the field of aesthetics research prompted a shift towards analysing this classroom is linked to Leddy's (1995) claim that 'mess' is usually cast as a negative aesthetic quality. In relation to this claim, I discuss how the 'messy' form of the classroom elucidated rather negative comments from teachers and children alike. My analysis of these comments is coherent with Brooke's (2006) claim that responses to children's drawings are influenced by two discourses: Piaget's (1956) developmental learning theory *and* aesthetics and Fine Arts. Throughout the succeeding discussion, the drawing is referred to as the 'Cars Classroom' to indicate that I have also analysed the drawing as an expression of movement and engagement with the physical world. This is because the child indicated that he enjoyed playing with toy cars. Analysing the drawing in this way, using 'New Materialism' and post-structuralist thinking, was a deliberately disruptive attempt to foster new ways of seeing both the drawing, and 'school readiness'. The following analysis and discussion is also heavily underpinned by Law's (2004) assertion that the world, in constant flux, produces realit*ies* rather than one reality. My analysis therefore offers multiple, complex interpretations.

Just a Scribble

Mess can be defined as a perceptual aesthetic quality that can be applied in literal and metaphorical terms (Leddy, 1995). It has also been described as an everyday phenomena that prompts an automatic aesthetic reaction (Saito, 2007). At a literal level 'mess' tends to be applied as a negative quality because we are trained to see cleanliness (how things looks and smell) as more desirable (Leddy, 1995). This can lead people to make hasty judgements of a person, such as if their appearance is unkempt, or if their home is messy (Saito, 2001). Using aesthetic sensibilities as an overlay to drawing can also lead adults to belie young children's meaning making endeavours (Brooke, 2006). Reflecting on these points, it is perhaps not surprising that the visual qualities of the 'Cars Classroom' provoked negative reaction and judgement from Reception teachers:

"It's not even basic pictures, it's just scribbles."
"I don't think he's ready for Year 1!"

As a result of the teachers' reactions I have come to the assertion that 'school readiness' is in some sense an aesthetic concept, as it would seem that children are required to 'look ready' in various ways, such as through their drawing of pictures, or in their ability to sit 'beautifully' on a carpet, as is often requested by teachers (MacLure *et al*., 2010). I would also suggest that the teachers' aesthetic reactions to the 'Cars Classroom' support the supposition that the classroom is an important site for the production of problematic reputations

(MacLure *et al*., 2010) as indicated by the teachers' discursive framing of the child's 'unreadiness' for school.

Saito (2007) points out that our detection of 'messiness' depends on the environment or object in question. For example, it is unlikely that mess would be seen as aesthetically pleasing in a library (Saito, 2007). Yet, mess in a mid-Eastern bazaar might be seen as charming (Saito, 2007). Thinking about objects, it would seem that a 'scribbled' drawing does not offer everyone aesthetic pleasure. This was not only expressed by the Reception teachers in Study One, but also by some of the children, whom I revisited (with the classroom drawings) 6 months after the study:

"That one's all scribbly and messy."
"That's just a bit of scribble."
"I don't know what is going on in that classroom!"

So if 'mess' is not necessarily welcomed on paper, how far is it welcomed in the classroom? I ask this question because the 'Cars Classroom' could be understood, in literal terms, as a depiction of 'mess'. Fenwick's (1988) findings suggest that tidiness is an important element of the rich concept that is classroom management. In her study, Fenwick (1988) noted that teachers had general expectations of an orderly, tidy space and encouraged students to take pride in their surroundings. However, Fenwick (1988) also perceived that children's physical energy felt like a 'bubbling cauldron' that 'wriggled' within the tidy classroom structures. More recently, Leafgren and Bornhurst (2016)

offered a similar take on this issue, using Foucault to argue that children's 'spirited' and 'bodied' needs are constrained by school structures and techniques of 'coercive control':

"The coercive techniques described by Foucault easily apply to the stratifying measures in the classroom in which teachers—as agents of the state machinery—determine where each child-body should be and what it should be allowed to touch and do." (p. 32)

Connecting the issues of coercive control and mess, research suggests that early years teachers sometimes use an authoritarian approach to keep noise and mess within reasonable bounds (Kallery and Psillos, 2002) and some even go as far as to ban play that appears too messy, dirty and out of control (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010). As such, these studies indicate that mess is not necessarily welcomed in classroom environments. This is most likely because narratives associated with the 'good' classroom are linked to predictable, ordered, and controlled contexts (Leafgren and Bornhurst, 2016). This point provides a useful framing of the teachers' responses to the 'Cars Classroom', because the drawing does not present as an orderly, knowable classroom environment.

It has been acknowledged that different people hold differing views concerning the value of everyday surface aesthetic qualities (Saito, 2007), and so it is likely that there are individuals who perceive classroom mess in positive terms. Hypothetically speaking, individual teachers might feel positive about mess if

they have read about its potential to stimulate children's creativity and imagination (e.g. Duffy, 2008). They might also actively encourage mess should they believe in the benefits of 'Messy Play', a type of play advocated in early years guidance:

"Despite appearances, messy play can make an enormous contribution to babies' and young children's cognitive and creative development (…) This guide aims to reclaim messy play as an important part of early years provision and demonstrate its importance for young children's learning and development." (Duffy, 2007, p. 1)

Duffy's (2007) discussion indicates that teachers' value of mess might well be influenced by discourses of developmentally appropriate practice. However, this is somewhat paradoxical given that metaphorical conceptions of mess, such as those which describe the complex realities of classroom practice, are not acknowledged in practices of 'readiness', the likes of which rely upon a linear, outcome-driven logic (Evans, 2015). In a later section of this discussion, I go on to describe how the 'Cars Classroom', when perceived in theoretically messy terms, transformed my thinking about the complexity of 'school readiness' in relation to early years environments.

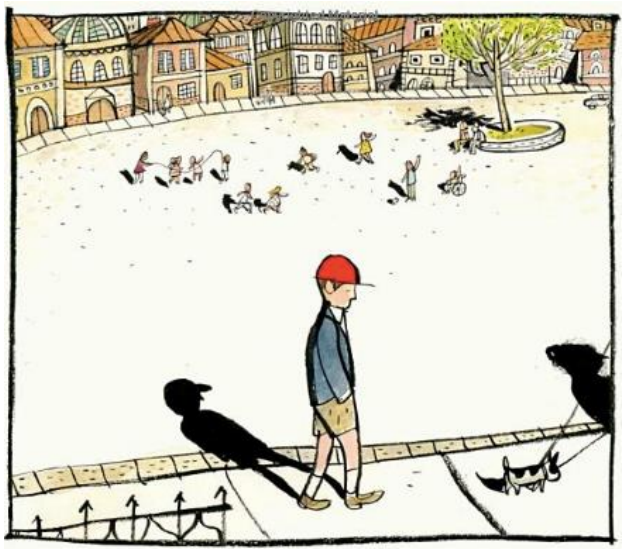
As a final point here, it is interesting to consider Leddy's (1995) assertion that mess has aesthetic appeal to children, despite children being encouraged to be neat, clean and orderly. This, Leddy (1995) reasons, could be seen as a form of rebellion. Corsaro's (1988) study of preschool culture is also interesting

for it revealed that children often see clean up time as an unnecessary task. Comments made by children during Corsaro's (1988) observations are a useful insight into these findings:

Graham says, "Clean-up time! Ain't that dumb! Clean-up time!" "Yeah," responds Peter, "we could just leave our dumptrucks here and play with 'em tomorrow."

Drawing from the work of these researchers (Saito 1995, 2007; Corsaro, 1988) and ideas included the preceding discussion, I was left wondering about the following questions: How far might The Cars Classroom be an expression of rebellion and power-fullness (Sellers, 2013)? And in what way might the Cars Classroom helps us to create lines of flight away from dominant systems of thought? Questions such as these indicate why aesthetics sensibilities alone do not provide an adequate or productive framework for analysing the Cars Classroom because "such a perspective overlays abstract notions of line and form over children's products often taking little account of the communicative intentions of young children or their meaning making endeavours" (Brooks, 2006, p. 52). Alternative analytical frameworks will therefore be used and discussed.

Left in the Shadows



"Smoot and his boy were inseparable.
Every day they brushed the same teeth, frowned the same frown, and drew the same pictures, always staying perfectly inside the lines…

The boy never laughed.
He never leaped.
And he especially never did anything wild.
The Smoot never did either.

Image 18. Words and image taken from taken from Smoot: A Rebellious Shadow by Michelle Cuevas (2017)

Definitions of 'discourse' offer a useful prelude to my following discussion of the teacher's responses to the 'Cars Classrooms'. In broad terms, discourse has been defined as the institutionalised use of language through which meanings are progressively achieved (Davies and Harre, 2000). Gee (2008) also described how each discourse is underpinned by a tacit set of theories about what counts as a 'normal' person. Within this frame of thinking, discourses associated with 'school readiness' have been read as problematic because of the way they reduce complexity in early years education and 'tame' children's subjectivities (Olsson, 2009) through the process of evaluating them according to predetermined standards:

"…inevitably not all children will achieve these normative ideals or progress across this spectrum in a recognizable manner, resulting in their exclusion from positions of 'success'." (Evans, 2015, p.32)

Relatedly, Davies and Hunt (1994) used post-structuralism to identify 'teaching-as-usual' as a powerful discourse in education. Davies and Hunt (2000) explained that 'teaching-as-usual' relates to the habitual way in which teachers assume themselves to unquestionably know what is going on in a classroom (Davies and Hunt, 1994). Within this discourse, students who disrupt the order can become caught up in particular subject positions, such as the disobedient or 'problem' student (Davies and Hunt, 2000). In positive terms however, Davies and Hunt (1994) also demonstrated that post-structuralist ideas can help draw teachers' attention to the problematic nature of the 'teaching-as-usual' discourse and prompt them to explore new ways of listening to students. Such findings promulgate post-structuralism as a useful framework for recognising the 'constitutive force' of discourse (Davies and Harré, 1990), and the ability of teachers' to disrupt these forces. By approaching the data using similar ideas, I will argue that several discourses, including that of 'teacher-as-usual' provided a repertoire of 'ready-to-hand interpretations' for teachers to use (Laws and Davies, 2000) in response to the 'Cars Classroom'. I will also draw attention to various other interpretations of the 'Cars Classroom' that could be made available to teachers using post-structuralist theories.

Despite the meaning (if any) that the creator of the 'Cars Classroom' (Image 17.) might or might not have been trying to communicate through their drawing, it is significant that some of the teachers were prepared to make judgements about the child in terms of their 'readiness' for Year 1, as indicated by these comments:

“I don’t think he’s ready for Year 1!”

“If you look at that then think of a Year 1 classroom, that child isn’t ready.”

“If this is how they’re drawing, they probably wouldn’t have the capacity to explain it.”

Is it issues with concentration? Confidence?

“He’ll be left in the shadows.”

Indeed, the drawing prompted the teachers to identify several characteristics that they regarded as significant to ‘school readiness’, relating to concentration, confidence, and the ability to communicate effectively through drawing and speaking. As such, it could be said that ‘school readiness’ discourse prompts teachers to make simplistic and reductive readings of Reception children’s abilities.

In response to the work of several authors (e.g. Anning and Ring, 2004) it is also my view that the teachers’ negative reactions to the ‘Cars Classroom’ drawing were a response to the lack of perceptual accuracy present on the page. Anning and Ring (2004) have described how children’s early attempts at making meaning can often be dismissed as scribbles and so are unlikely to gain positive feedback from adults. Cox (2005) also described how assumptions related to developmental stage theory have a persistent influence on the way we look at children’s drawings. Using stage theory, drawings tend to be analysed as an artefact, and in terms of what they say about the child’s stage of development (Cox, 2005). Thus, when a drawing has failed to meet the goals

of perceptual accuracy, the child's drawing is seen in a deficient light (Cox, 2005), as was the case during some teachers' analysis of the Cars Classroom. This interpretation is further supported by the following teachers comments:

"It tells you developmentally about the ones that are drawing really well. I'm saying you're ready for school, you're not ready for school."
"If this is how they are drawing they probably wouldn't have the capacity to explain it."

With the teachers' comments in mind, it is useful to further consider how other researchers (e.g. Cherney *et al*., 2006) have studied children's drawings and how Piaget (1956) might have influenced their work, for Piaget (1956) argued that drawing provides a window into child's general cognitive development. Writing in an educational psychology journal, Cherney *et al*. (2006) suggested that a child's drawing is a useful tool for assessing their development:

"U*nderstanding children's representational development is an essential component for constructing a more complete picture of cognitive development."*

Writing from a similar perspective, Morra and Panesi, (2017) presented a model of children's 'typical' scribbling development and their first steps in representational drawing, in relation to working memory. Morra and Panesi, (2017) indicated that their results provided strong evidence of a correlation between working memory capacity and drawing completion tasks. Speculative links can also be made between my research and that of Tallandini and

Valentini (1991) who asked children aged 5-11 to draw a school. However, the purpose of Tallandini and Valentini's (1991) study differed greatly to my own given that they subjected children's drawings to a scoring process that took into account pictorial components such as building structure and windows (Tallandini and Valentini, 1991). As part of this scoring process, the most rudimentary of children's drawing strategies were labelled 'failed symbolism', and assigned to those drawings in which pictorial components had either not been depicted or were unrecognisable (Tallandini and Valentini, 1991). Overall, these studies reflect the Piagtian view that as children develop cognitively, they move from scribbles, to simple pictures to differentiated, complex ones. It is argued here that these studies can help us understand why several of the Reception teachers used the 'Cars Classroom' as a tool for assessing several aspects of children's development in relation to school 'readiness'. It is also understood that the maturational developmental concept of 'readiness' evident within the structuring of the EYFS (DfE, 2017) (Evans, 2015) will have had particular significance for the way the teachers' responded to the drawing, for these teachers will have had major exposure to these interpretations. Such assertions are supported by the work of several authors (Burman, 1994; Walkerdine, 1989; Laws and Davies, 2000) who have identified psychological discourses and in particular developmental psychology, as powerful discourses through which students are subjected.

The teachers' general comments about children's drawings, as well as those relating specifically to the 'Cars Classroom', also warrant a discussion about drawing in the EYFS (DfE, 2017). This is because one teacher described The

Cars Classrooms as ‘mark making’; a term that is popular within early years circles (Hall, 2007). While not directly referenced in the EYFS (DfE, 2017) the term ‘mark making’ has appeared in several government documents. As a first example, ‘Mark Making Matters’ (DCSF, 2008) linked mark making in positive terms with creativity and critical thinking. In this booklet, the DCSF (2008) also suggested that an improved understanding of mark making on the part of practitioners would strengthen provision for Language and Literacy, and problem solving and reasoning in numeracy. As a second example, the ‘Development Matters’ guidance document launched by Early Education in 2012 describes mark making as a sensory and physical experience for babies and toddlers. It also emphasises mark making as an important step in a child’s journey towards writing. Certainly, working with these documents, it is easy to see why the abilities of the ‘Cars Classroom’ creator were seen in deficit ‘not ready’ terms, given that mark making is posited as a drawing strategy used by very young children. It would also seem that the teachers were influenced by the opinion that drawing as a form of communication is predominantly a pre-writing skill.

As indicated in the discussion thus far, theories about children’s drawings have pertained to establishing schematic universalities and positioning children’s drawing skills as always *‘in progress’* (Knight, 2013). Such a view has been criticised for ignoring children’s social, cultural and historical contexts and influences and for having a negative influence on classroom practice (Anning and Ring, 2004; Brooks, 2006). As a response to these criticisms, researchers have looked through various other ‘drawing lens’, several of which could be

used to analyse the ‘Cars Classroom’. Using a Vygotskian lens (1962), Brooks (2006) argued that drawing is a metacognitive cultural tool that allows children to make connections between concepts and form meaning:

“When drawing informs thought and thought is given life through drawing we can begin to see the connection between thought and drawing and the value of drawing in the creation of meaning.” (p. 53)

Through this lens, the creator of the ‘Cars Classroom’ must therefore be acknowledged as having used drawing for specific communicative and meaning-making purposes, such as to communicate their idea of a ‘perfect classoom’. This certainly appears a more positive stance, compared to thinking of the drawing as meaningless scribble. However, it also appears to me that Vygotskian (1962) ideas have the potential to generate some negative interpretations of the ‘Cars Classroom’ given the links Vygotsky (1978) made between thought and speech, and the ‘intellectual life’ that surrounds the child. I would suggest that my concerns are reflected in the following teachers’ comments, some of which link the scribbled form of the ‘Cars Classroom’ with a lack of life experience:

“There’s something about detail and something you can perceive around range of experiences. From the graphic representation you can tell who has got a really wide range of references.”

"The expressive language matches the graphic detail. I know that as a practitioner that is what I do, I really align what children are able to represent with a belief that they've got a really rich and wide set of experiences, that links to a really detailed wide and imaginative vocabulary."

In response to these comments, it is my view that a different framework is needed to help us rethink the 'Cars Classroom'. This is why I turn to the work of Knight (2013) who used Deleuze's writings about the 'imaginary' to celebrate the spontaneous, mystical and abstract nature of children's drawings.

"Drawings cannot be categorized by age, stage or schema because they force an impact on the earth in indeterminate ways. A significant rethinking of how children's drawings 'become', how they can be brought into being, and also how they should be thought about is sorely needed." (p. 258)

In this way, Knight's (2013) work helps foreground the 'Cars Classroom' drawing as a momentary pause, a result of impulse, and as productive, unpredictable activity. Likewise, Knight's (2013) work also highlights the highly interpretative and grievous nature of using developmental theories, for they only work to silence and discredit many aspects of children's drawing.

As a conclusion to this section of my analysis, I wish to offer a further mention of one teacher's foresight, that the creator of the 'Cars Classroom would be 'left in the shadows' in Year 1. This comment to me suggests that the child is seen as powerless in relation to their supposedly 'ready' peers, and will perhaps

present a dilemma for the next teacher in charge. What is worrying is whether this foresight had any truth, and whether this child, having been defined in such negative terms, will remain somewhat invisible at the margins of the classroom:

"Being positioned as one who belongs in or is defined in terms of the negative or dependent term can, we argue here, lock people into repeated patterns of powerlessness." (Davies and Hunt, 1994, p. 389)

So what does the classroom look like from this marginal position and how could a child positioned there be seen in more power-full terms? It is now my aim to attend to the minute details of the Cars Classroom as a way of trying to find out.

… shadows can dream.

And when they do, the dreams

are filled with colour.

Image 19. “Smoot. A Rebellious Shadow” (Cuevas, 2017).

Thinking with Milieus

So far I have indicated that the ‘Cars Classroom’ could be analysed in deficit terms because of its scribbled form. Yet these same ‘scribbles’ could be read in more positive productive ways, using similar lines of thinking to Matthew (1984) who described ‘scribbles’ as meaningful experiments in the representation of the movement of objects and other bodies. With Matthew’s

(1984) point in mind, it is significant that one teacher responded to the 'Cars Classroom' in the following way:

"For the one who appears to be much less ready, that could have taken a full hour and been a lot of reflection going on there, not verbally. It's about whether this one is seeing school as chaotic or is it to do with where the cars are going? Is this a really good representation of movement and activity?"

This comment stood out to me because the teacher considered the classroom as being more than a sign of the child's 'readiness'. Rather they asked some fascinating questions relating to intention, movement, and the chaotic nature of classroom life, having been given this time to reflect. From a post-structuralist perspective, this comment could be read as a rejection of dominant discourses, for they refused an explanation that produced the child as 'unready'. The comment could also be aligned with a view that the lived experience of a preschool is messy, complex and unpredictable (Olsson, 2009; Osberg and Biesta, 2008; Bakašun *et al*., 2016), and with the Deleuzian concept of milieu; a concept which can be used to disrupt static, expected notions of the classroom (Leafgren, 2013). Building on this point, I will now examine the way in which the 'Cars Classroom' could be seen as an 'expression of activity, through/with/in a milieu' (Sellers, 2015) as inspired by the teacher's comment.

The Reception teacher used the word 'chaotic' in her commentary about the 'Cars Classroom'. She also referred to the movement and activity of the cars. In similar terms, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assert that milieus are chaotic

and vibratory spaces of activeness and '*thingness'*. In classrooms, teachers and children co-create and resist milieus in the way they situate objects, use certain language and wear particular clothing (Bond, 2007; Leafgren, 2007); they affect the space, they bend it, they shape it, and they seek comfort in it (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). They also set up rhythms and repetitions that define the place as a classroom, some of which might replicate those found at home (Janz, 2001). In addition to these rhythms, milieus can be striated in many ways, such as by the placement of desks or the use of behaviour charts; these serve the state and are a way of communicating order (Leagren, 2007). During the 'perfect drawing' task, recognisable objects and people pertinent to an early years classroom appeared – carpet areas, desks, toys, a whiteboard, and children. These could be considered markers of children's classroom milieu, or elements that fit its rhythm (Leagren, 2007). However, unexpected things, such as tortoises, Shopkins and dancing pineapples also materialised. These could be considered 'alternative lines of flight' or markers of children's efforts to disrupt, and find comfort in the striated environment of a classroom (Leagren, 2007). Such theorising renders a classroom a highly complex concept, for it appears to be a place where safety and comfort are complexly entangled with repetition, resistance and disorder, a conceptualisation that sits at odds with the mechanistic logic upon which 'readiness' discourses rely:

"…lines of flight do not intend to destroy the classroom milieu – only to smooth the way for opening it up to multiple other milieus toward that space of comfort." (Leafgren, 2007, p. 280).

In one sense, the form of the ‘Cars Classroom’, with its loops and curves, and twists and turns could be seen as an affective representation of ideas associated with the concept of the milieu, ideas which conceptualise the classroom as an always changing, mutating space. Plugging into the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) has also advanced my thinking about the significance of a toy car, for it is important to remember that this is what the child said they had drawn. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) used the story of a humming child to indicate the way children use repetition and other ways of marking to seek comfort in the milieu and to find rhythm in the chaos. Teachers also use repetition to seek comfort, but in other ways such as using markers that striate, control and make-still (Leafgren, 2007). On the topic of repetition, the following teachers’ comments are therefore significant:

“That’s probably all he plays with (referring to the cars) – he’s probably quite single-minded in his play.”
“I bet his car play is quite solitary based on the fact he hasn’t got much language to be able to explain it to you.”

Such comments, spoken as responses to the ‘Cars Classroom’, are theories rather than truths, for the teachers had not observed this child in their play. The comments indicate there is something wrong with a child being on their own or engaged in repetitive play. Perhaps this is because repetitive play has been linked with notions of mental delay (e.g. Lender *et al.*, 1998). The comments also suggest that breadth and depth, and socialising in play/learning are more valuable, perhaps in ‘school readiness’ terms. Yet, what if a toy car brings

solace (Jones *et al*., 2012) amidst the chaos, or is an important marker of home, in the same way a Shopkin might be? For a person can feel at home simply in the presence of an object (Wise, 2000). Turning to Wise (2000) and his Deleuzian interpretation of 'habit', we might also understand that playing with a car on a number of occasions does not have to be seen in negative terms, for habits are like rhythms, never quite the same, and a*lways* charged with the potential to produce something new (Deleuze, 1994). What these ideas suggest is that a child will never play with a car in the same way twice because 'at the heart of repetition is difference' (Wise, 2000, p. 304). What's more, these ideas point to the way Deleuzian logic (once again) creates possibilities for thinking more positively about the 'Cars Classroom', this time by moving towards a new production of children's habits and toy car play.

More than a Car

"There are spectres haunting the classrooms - bodies and affects. Yet, teachers and students are often not supposed to have bodies and affects because education should be about the acquisition of knowledge." (Zemblylas, 2007, p. 19)

The creator of the 'Car Classroom' indicated that their 'perfect classroom' drawing depicted toy cars. One teacher suggested this same classroom drawing might be *"a really good representation of movement and activity?"* 'New Materialist' thinking could further link these two comments together, particularly when we consider the following two arguments; firstly that forces

and movement are inseparable to matter itself (Coole and Frost, 2007), and secondly, that objects are ‘vibrant matter’, which incite and entice us to do something (Bennett, 2010). Along this line of thinking, we could see the toy cars in a classroom as having produced affects, and the ‘Cars Classroom’ as being a translation of these affects, as indicated by the wildness of the lines. Similarly, using Manning (2013) and Massumi, (2011), we might also think less about the toy car as a familiar object, and more about what the car does, its unpredictability in generating movement, the way it gives way to a more-than-human experience, and how it activates thought. Bennett (2010) suggests that when an object gives way to an experience, a vibratory rhythm is co-composed and a new quality of experience emerges that then becomes something else. Put another way, Springgay and Rotas (2015) suggested that it is the unactualizable experience (of the car) that changes the rhythm of things and invents different ways of being in the world. As an implication of these understandings, the Cars Classroom drawing might therefore pose the following questions: How do we learn to see cars and toys as more than objects? How do we learn to see a drawing as more than a sign of a particular stage of brain capacity or intellect? Does the drawing suggest that learning through movement is important? I would suggest that these types of questions offer a more productive way of analysing the drawing, and expanding narrow conceptualisations of ‘school readiness’. Such questions also align with post-structuralist thinking for they demonstrate my attempt to work productively with the complexity of human experience and to move away from human-centred perspectives.

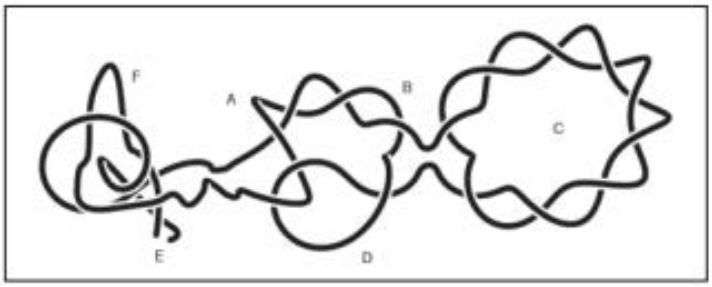


Image 20. A Deleuzian Diagram

Post-structuralist thinker de Freitas (2012) experimented with knot diagrams as a way of shedding light on the complex, rhizomatic and ontogenetic nature of classroom interactions. De Freitas' (2012) knot diagrams, (as in the example in Image 20) comprised of many diverse elements such as ruptures, over/under knot crossings and lines of 'new energy', all of which she used in varying degrees across different diagrams to indicate the open or closed nature classroom interactions. Speaking of Image 20, de Freitas (2012) explained:

"As a diagram of classroom interaction, it captures the delicate nature of interaction and points to the order or symmetry (managed behaviour) and more divergent thinking or actions." (p. 568)

Deleuzian concepts such as assemblage and rhizome were useful to de Freitas (2012) in her mapping of movement. For de Freitas (2012) the classroom assemblage is composed of diverse elements such as humans, writing implements, desks and doors and daily routines; the classroom assemblage grows like a rhizome, in that it twists, loops and ruptures. Affect and power stretch across the assemblage. Thus, de Freitas (2012) became interested in

moments of ruptures, lines of flight and differentiation that occur in classroom interaction.

De Freitas' (2012, 2014) research diagrams stand in contrast to those that have been used previously in educational research, many of which are purported to convey 'the essential components involved in teaching and learning' (p.558). An example of such a model was used by Bulotsky-Shearer *et al*. (2011) (Figure 2) in her study examining associations among children's problem behaviour, the behavioural context of the classroom, and 'school readiness' outcomes for a cohort of low-income children. The model in question hypothesized that both child-level problem behaviour and classroom-level problem behaviour *would* contribute uniquely to 'school readiness' outcomes. Although not directly described as such, it could be that Bulotsky-Shearer *et al*.'s (2011) diagram 'structures and confines our understandings of classrooms' (de Freitas, 2012). It could also be said that diagrams often try to tidy up the mess of the world.

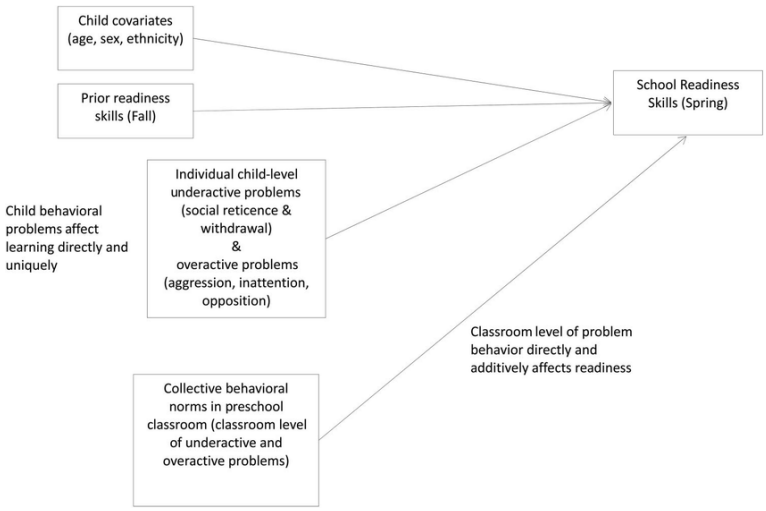


Figure 2. A model used by Bulotsky-Shearer *et al*. (2011) in her study examining associations among children's problem behaviour, the behavioural context of the classroom

The resemblance between de Freitas (2012, 2014) knotted diagrams and the Cars Classroom are somewhat striking, and so it is interesting to use elements of de Freitas' (2012, 2014) thinking to explore the Cars Classroom as a diagram (drawing-diagram), as a way of transforming my experience of it. Using de Freitas' (2012, 2014) words, I see the Cars Classroom as having evoked an artful rhizomatic abstraction of a classroom assemblage. Looping lines fold and grow, and multiple sites of exit and entry can be observed. The car becomes an agent, which has become incorporated into the assemblage. The drawing-diagram itself offers a rupture, because of its form and vagueness. It undermines the conventions of graphic representation. It does not tidy up the mess of the world. It does not reduce complex phenomena. If anything, it exacerbates it. And it is in this sense that the drawing, and child might alternatively be celebrated as power-full and creative forces.

This here marks a somewhat fitting yet frustrating end to my work with Study One data; frustrating because there is so much of it that cannot be discussed within the confines of this thesis (see Appendices 12-15 for further examples of classroom drawings). If there were room, I'd like to have thought more about the dancing pineapple that appeared in another classroom drawing, a pineapple that I later discovered was inspired by a very popular YouTube video. I would also like to have discussed The Tortoise Classroom (Appendix 13), a classroom that inspired me to write a poem of words during the early stages of my analysis (Appendix 16). Despite these frustrations, I hope that my work thinking with the Shopkins Classroom and the Cars Classroom, two classrooms that provoked much 'wonder', has illustrated what is possible for us to achieve when we think deeply and theoretically about children's ideas. Children are spontaneous and intelligent becomings who respond to the world around them in uniquely perceptive, changeable ways. Certainly, it should not have been surprising that the Cars Classroom would provide the inspiration and clarity necessary to expand my research approach, having worked with so many intelligent young children. Yet, it did, it turned the world upside down (Image 21) and this is why children's ideas offer great hope in helping all of us think differently about the world. In the next chapter I turn to notice and think more deeply about a new set of ideas, ideas that emerged unexpectedly during children's entanglements with clay during Ideas Club.

"And there at the bottom, everything was turned upside down. The whole world seemed brand new to me as if it just been created right in front of me"

Image 21. "On A Magical Do-Nothing Day" Alemagna (2018)

CHAPTER 5: CHILDREN'S ENTANGLEMENTS WITH CLAY

"Wonder is relational. It is not clear where it originates and to whom it belongs. It seems to be "out there," emanating from a particular object, image, or fragment of text; but it is also "in" the person that is affected."

(MacLure, 2013, p. 229)

As a sensory experience, Ideas Club felt like clay and junk materials in our hands and between our fingers, it sounded like laughter and talk, and the crunch of biscuits in our mouths, and it looked like fidget spinners, cardboard box classrooms and picture books…

Image 22. Ideas Club

Ideas Club also felt, looked and sounded different in each of the three schools

involved in the research, reflecting the unique collectivity of children who took part in each club. The ‘interfering charge’ of affect and emergence (Massumi, 2002) also made each Ideas Club session a singular and indeterminate experience, in that the children connected with each other, the materials, and myself in abstract ways that could not be predetermined or replicated in other schools. As well as photographs, what I also want to share here are some of the seemingly random, but interesting things the children said during Ideas Club because they help to encapsulate the most valuable aspect of the experience, which for me was tied up in moments of happenstance conversation, and in the simple act of getting to linger and to *be there* with Reception children:

“Just as looking and listening are things that research requires and children demand, it is necessary to take the time to linger, to live within the situation, in order to see those things that begin to occur or perhaps are noticed only when given enough time to become evident.” (Thompson, 2009, p. 27)

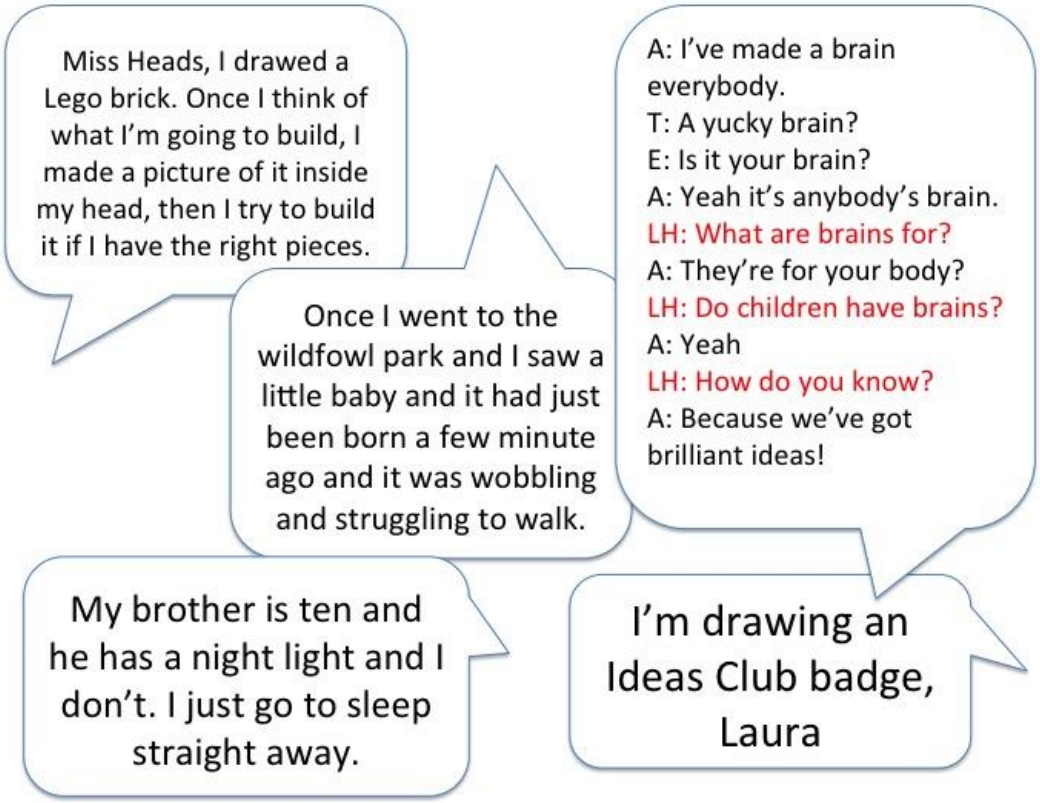


Figure 3. Ideas club quotes

Nevertheless, research is also a process of making choices, including the difficult choice of what to document among the many events occurring in a lively classroom (Thompson, 2009) and what ideas to share in the constrained space of this thesis. To write this chapter, I therefore had to be attentive to which of the children's ideas had 'grasped me' both during the Ideas Club process and after – "these moments confound the industrious, mechanical search for meanings, patterns, codes, or themes; but at the same time, they exert a kind of fascination, and have a capacity to animate further thought" (MacLure, 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, the children's ideas that intrigued me the most were of the material, complex kind, as this chapter will now reveal.

Clay Curiosities

On an oval table, in a small meeting space in the school sit eight lumps of cold, grey clay. The clay was taken from inside a plastic wrapper, but it began life somewhere else. Clay tools also lie in the middle of the table. The school bell has already signalled the end of the school day. The children are in one of the Reception classrooms having a drink and a biscuit. They are passing round the voice recorder, saying their names, and listening back. There are giggles, as there always are when the voice recorder is used. The clay waits in the room. Soon after the children arrive. They explore the clay, they change it, and they care for it. The unexpected emerges. Clay becomes a family, a shark, a pearl and a platform. Clay forces new thought and interesting ideas…

An introductory narrative to children's use of clay during Ideas Club

In the previous chapter, I connected the 'Cars Classroom' with theories of New Materialism to encourage the reader to think about what a car can 'do' and to think about the experiences a toy car might give way to, as inspired by the classroom drawing. The discussion 'More than a Car' was also used to indicate the way play objects can be taken for granted in early years spaces. The following discussion has a similar purpose, to use children's clay ideas to diversify understandings of materials and to unsettle simplified ideas about materials being dead, numb and only a means for achieving educational goals. I begin by talking broadly about clay, in terms of its qualities, its apparent value in schools and the way it was changed during Ideas Club. From there I offer three examples of particularly interesting transformations of clay, entitled 'Down the Rabbit Holes', 'Red Cheeks' and 'The Pearl and the Platform'. Using

Haraway (1985), these clay ideas might even be thought of as ‘gifts’ because they prompted me to ask questions about the way in which we care for children in early years education, and conceptualise their intelligence. As mentioned, ideas associated with New Materialism underpin my wonderings about these ideas. The consequence of this line of thought is that “Things, just as humans, offer certain possibilities and foreclose others” (Hultman, 2010, p.7). The idea that clay ‘calls to be known’ and to be ‘explored by the senses’ (Sherwood, 2004 p.5) also aligns with theories of New Materialism which position the material world as ‘quasi-agent’ with tendencies of its own (Bennett 2010, viii). In addition, inflections of post-humanism and relationality (Haraway, 2003) can be detected in my analysis, such as in my attempts to deflate the human-animal binary. Drawing on post-humanism indicates my diffractive approach (Mazzei, 2014) to analysis and my commitment to reading data through multiple theoretical insights.

Entanglements with Clay

As Merewether (2018) points out, early years environments are abound with materials such as sand, paint, clay and paper. Educators and children use these materials to investigate, negotiate, converse and share (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2017). It therefore felt appropriate that a material such as clay might become a part of an early years Ideas Club. Of course, this was not my only rationale for using clay; its versatility as a material appeared to align with my attempts to foster a more open-ended approach to researching with children:

"Pinch it, poke it, press it, shape it, throw it, scrape it, form it, lift it. Clay is incredibly versatile. It can be sliced, engraved, embellished, glazed, washed, carried, burnished, heaved, fired, dropped, shaped, sculpted, soaked, sprayed, hollowed, altered, polished, painted, pounded, flattened, carved, transformed." (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2017)

With Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*.'s (2017) endorsement in mind, it is worth thinking briefly about the way clay might function in a classroom. Typically, materials such as clay are integrated into early years environments on the understanding that materials are important to children's development and learning. In the EYFS (DfE, 2017) exploring and using materials is linked to children's development of expression, imagination, and their ability to use tools safely. Children's use of clay has also been related to 'creative representation', learning about 'cause and effect relationships' (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995) and fostering a connection with the natural environment (Tuan, 1978). Yet in Hartley's (2013) study, teachers admitted they did not like using clay in the classroom because of its messy qualities. Clay only tended to be used on rainy days when other materials were not available, or in small groups led by a teacher (Hartley, 2013). Clay was also used in such a way, that meaningful products were considered a more valuable output than spontaneous exploration (Hartley, 2013). This is perhaps because the teachers understood representation as linking positively to children's development. There is also the argument that educators prefer to take what children do at a literal level, rather than consider the possible complexities children's work proposes:

"…there is an incredible richness, variations, and electicism in what young children do. In many ways educators limit this richness or provoke a narrow experience by what we think, what we expect, and the frames we use to interpret children's artistic explorations." (Kind, 2010, p.116)

The teachers' literal and rather negative reactions to the 'Cars Classroom' certainly support this line of thinking.

Hartley's (2013) findings about teachers' perceptions of clay resonate with some of my own experiences of using clay as a researcher. For instance, clay was not necessarily welcome in certain (clean) school spaces and many of the Ideas Club children had not used clay before (but had instead used materials such as play-doh and plasticene). I also think children's use of clay during Ideas Club was inhibited (at first) by my own narrow ways of thinking about clay as a passive, functional medium for representing thought. Fortunately, my rather simplistic views were made complex with the understanding that clay does not simply function as an 'add-on', but rather intra-acts with children, changes them, and has the potential not only to evoke memories, ideas and stories (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*.'s. 2017; Kind, 2014), but to shape human learning' (Rotas and Springgay, 2015). Consequently, my aim is to tell stories of what happens when children think *with*, and become entangled with clay:

"Thinking with materials transforms early childhood education, provoking educators to notice how materials and young children live entangles lives in

classrooms, how they change each other through their mutual encounters." (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2017)

In this chapter I have indicated that my encounters in Ideas Club transformed my thinking *with* clay. Before I present my analysis of children's clay ideas I will also describe my understanding of their emergence. To develop this understanding I attended to the work of Fredriksen (2011), who studied the relationship between children's experience with three-dimensional materials and their meaning-making processes. Observing one child's 'discoveries' with clay, Fredriksen (2011) noted the impossibility of knowing what happens in the mind when ideas for working with clay are born. Fredriksen (2011) further suggested that 3D materials stimulate peculiar 'meetings' between children's past experiences and the 'not yet understood'. Likewise, it is impossible for me to know where the children's ideas came from when they became entangled with clay during Ideas Club, so instead, inspired by Fredriksen's (2011) discussion, I came to suppose that the children's ideas had emerged as a result of on-going, contextual and personal processes, linked to the specific qualities of the clay, the process of experiencing clay within a small group of other familiar children, and the combining of new and previous experiences. This means that the children's entanglement with clay was understood as a complex investigative engagement (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2007). Meanings were not known ahead of time (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*., 2007) rather meanings were constituted in the encounter between forces (Massumi, 2002), ungraspable in the moment of its occurrence but real in its effects (O'Sullivan, 2005). This also means that the clay *and* the children produced ideas that were 'yet to be

thought':

"*Knowing is not about prediction and control but about remaining 'attentive to the unknown knocking at our door.'* (Deleuze, 1989, p 193)

In the following sections I offer analysis of two pieces of data – 'Down the Rabbit Holes' (Image 23) and 'Red Cheeks' (Image 25). This analysis offers a useful prelude to my reading of another transformation of clay called 'The Pearl and the Platform' for they draw attention to my wonderings about 'caring children' and 'more-than-human' learning (Taylor and Blaise, 2014), themes that emerged unexpectedly when I began to think *with* Reception children's clay ideas.

Rabbit Holes and Red Cheeks

"In such a heterogeneous, thrown together and precarious world, relations between ourselves and others – both human and more-than-human others – are of paramount importance." (Taylor and Giugni, 2012, p109)

'Down the Rabbit Holes' materialised during an open-ended exploration of clay, when there were no expected end products. In contrast, 'Red Cheeks' emerged during a more closed task, when I asked the children to respond in a specific way to the book 'What is a Child?' by Beatrica Allemagna (2008). This distinction in approaches becomes an important point for discussion later in the chapter.

“I’ll have to make a little hole because I’m going to pretend bunny rabbits can get in.”

“I’m making holes for the bunny rabbits to go in.”

“These are for the little tiny bunny rabbits.”

“I’m going to put some doors in so the bunny rabbits can just push the doors and then push it back through so nobody can see the bunny rabbits.”

Image 23. When clay became ‘Bunny Rabbit holes’ during Ideas Club. One child articulated all words offered here.

When clay is prodded with fingers and thumbs to become ‘Bunny Rabbit Holes’ (Image 23) as it was during an open-ended exploration of clay in Ideas Club, what comes to mind? A rabbit hole is an underground home, a place out of sight for rabbits to avoid predation and to sleep. A rabbit hole is also known as a burrow, and a network of interconnecting burrows is known as a warren. It appears that the child was paying attention to the life world of another creature. Notice the way the child used the phrase ‘bunny rabbit’. Perhaps the child used

the phrase ‘bunny rabbit’ because the clay model was created in a setting (School 3), which ran an after-school ‘Bunny Club’. In this after-school club a small group of Reception children were given the chance to care for the school’s pet rabbits by feeding them, handling them and cleaning out their enclosure. With the school bunnies in mind, it struck me that there is something very caring about the way in which the child spoke about the ‘bunny rabbits’ and created holes and doors *for them* so the rabbits could not be seen. Could we therefore describe ‘Bunny Rabbit holes’ as an act of caring for the world? Could we also say that when we work with clay, when we mould it and shape it as the children in Ideas Club did, that this is an act of care in itself? Wonderings such as these go some way to supporting Hodgins’ (2014) view that young children regularly participate in acts of caring (both real and imagined) in early childhood settings through their engagements with materials and other people. Also relevant is the suggestion that children’s desire to care is often left unattended (Swick, 2006). This, Swick (2006) argues, is a missed opportunity to ‘launch children on a life journey to be in service to others’:

“Classrooms are or should be places where caring is the most prevalent activity among children and adults in the processes of caring and serving.” (p. 280)

So why might clay enact modes of care in the classroom? The answer for Pacini-Ketchabaw and Boucher (2019) lies in the web of relations and memories that already exist within it:

"…the challenge becomes how to care for clay that has travelled so far, been made seemingly placeless and participated in capital exchanges." (p. 27-28)

From my own experience of teaching Reception children, I readily agree with Hodgins (2016) that children frequently engage in acts of caring. I have seen this in Reception children's care of each other, in their care of ladybirds they find on the playground, and in their imagined play. I am also inclined to agree that these acts of care are often not taken as seriously as they could be (Swick, 2006), perhaps because developmental logic 'blinds us' to the multiplicity of children's care experiences (Hodgins, 2016), and/or because young children are typically encouraged to become 'independent', 'school ready' learners. Interestingly, it was through her engagement with multiple perspectives, such as human-and non-human relationality, and material feminism that Hodgins (2016) was able to take children's caring relationships with dolls and cars more seriously. These perspectives, and her attention to the way children and things 'become' through their relatings, also allowed Hodgins (2016) to complicate child-centred ways of caring for young children in early years education:

"By de-centering children in these caring moments, are holes poked into bounded gendered (and developmental) explanations of care? What happens if we make space for other images of what care can look like?" (p. 212)

Valuably, Hodgins' (2016) discussion led me to be differently curious about 'Bunny Rabbit Holes' and to understand the encounter as more than an act of care for a vulnerable 'other' (as human exceptionalism might have us believe); it became a way of drawing attention to children's already-there relation with the 'More-than-Human World' (Taylor *et al*., 2012), and the complexity of the

assemblage (of child, clay, rabbits, doors and holes) that came to be – 'bodies, thinking, and environment entwined' (Clark, 2012). Clay and rabbits do not need to be cared for, instead they are parts of a world that we "seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web*"* (Fisher and Tronto, 1990, p. 103) To conceive of care in this way falls in line with the New Materialism's call to place the body in a broader network of bodies, such as the bodies of animals and other vibrant 'things' (Roffe and Stark, 2015; Bennett 2010), and with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) efforts to recast humans within heterogeneous assemblages alongside other entities. In this way, we might perceive that clay provoked the creator of 'Down the Rabbit Holes' to 'jump the fence', to meet with rabbits in a shared world, to quash the dividing line between humans and animals, and to acknowledge the 'outward direction of what we call the 'self' (Braidotti, 2009). Thus, I am trying to work with a notion of care that Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) describes as ambivalent and disruptive because it requires decentring human agencies and acknowledging that the fortunes of so many entities in the world are 'unavoidably entangled'. When we acknowledge that we live in a world that is increasingly characterised by the cumulative destructive impact of human activities upon the earth and its biosphere (Taylor and Giugni, 2012), 'Down the Rabbit Holes' could also be seen to confront pressing political and ethical questions about how we practise inclusion in early childhood education:

"…children's worlds do not begin and end with exclusively human entities and concerns. This recognition complicates the notion of inclusion – as it raises new questions about who and what belong in early childhood common worlds, and

who and what decide who belongs. Although non-human nature – comprising the plants, animals and natural environments – is definitely valued within western early childhood discourses, it is still seen as external to and separate from the world of children and their families." (Taylor, 2012, p. 111)

Curiouser and Curiouser

"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for a moment she quite forgot how to speak good English)." (Carroll, 1865, p. 16)

On first glance, and using narrow frames of education, 'Bunny Rabbit Holes' might be consigned to the domain of 'make believe' or 'cute' play. Such deductions could easily make 'Bunny Rabbit Holes' appear as rather unremarkable. 'Bunny Rabbit Holes' might also be perceived as buoying the conventional wisdom that young children have a 'natural affinity with nature' (Taylor, 2013), an idea strongly associated with Rousseau's (1979) 'Nature as Teacher' philosophies. Such wisdom, which positioned Nature as the antithesis to society, has shaped much of the course of early childhood education (Taylor, 2013). To counter these conventional interpretations I chose to inflect this line of thinking with aspects of post-humanism and New Materialism (for the strength of taking a post-structuralist perspective is that it requires us to acknowledge the multiple). Such lines of thought opened my eyes to new ways of thinking with 'Bunny Rabbit Holes', such as to consider the significance of children's caring relations with things. In this way becoming curious through post-humanism and New Materialism took me 'down a rabbit hole' to a place of

new ideas. Relatedly, Levy *et al*. (2016) described thinking diffractively with data as a 'methodological rabbit hole'. By 'thinking diffractively' Levy *et al*. (2016) did not turn themselves in any one direction towards the data, but allowed the data to 're-turn itself differently to them', the outcome of which was 'different and unintended outcomes and possibilities for qualitative inquiry' (p.195). I would argue that the unexpected insights generated by small shifts in my own theoretical framework bear relation to Levy *et al*.'s (2016) 'diffractive' approach. Perhaps these shifts also point to my willingness to go down the 'methodological rabbit hole'.

The metaphor 'down a rabbit hole' feels particularly apt given my attempts to think with 'Bunny Rabbit Holes', and to find new ideas in the complex and illusionary world that is 'school readiness'. The metaphor also has an obvious allusion to Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in in Wonderland (1865), the opening lines of which are captured below.

So she was considering in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, `Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!' (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked

at it, and then hurried on (…) In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

Some of the opening lines (p 9-10) of Alice in Wonderland (Carroll, 1865)

It is interesting, that at first glance, the white rabbit appeared 'unremarkable' to Alice. It was only when the rabbit spoke and pulled out its watch that Alice began to think otherwise. It is also thought-provoking that it was Alice's 'burning curiosity' that prompted her to follow the rabbit into the rabbit-hole, a hole that would open up into a puzzling world of caterpillars, grinning cats and decks of talking cards. If you continue reading the story, you find that Alice uses the word 'curious' several more times. Relatedly, Hodgins (2016) puts 'being curious' to work in her discussion of care, suggesting that by being 'differently curious' we can better attend to the complexities of children's worlds, a way of thinking that was inspired by Haraway (2007):

"Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning". (Haraway, 2007, p. 36)

Somewhat aligned with this definition, Fisher (2000) describes curiosity as: "…a state of alertness that makes us conscious of our biases and how they colour the apprehension of an idea" (p. 37). Valuably, both these explanations (Haraway, 2008; Fisher, 2000) rupture the unquestioned knowledges that make 'teachers recognisable as teachers' (described by Davies and Hunt, 1994, as a

‘teaching-as-usual discourse’) because to care in curious terms is to fulfil an ethical and political obligation to ‘know more’ and be accountable to the complexities of children’s world (Haraway, 2006; Hodgins, 2016). Gaining knowledge by being curious about children’s worlds might also minimise the chances of teachers relying on ‘made up knowledge’ in the work they do with and for children:

“The reason we should be finding it out is because the alternative to finding it out is not not finding it out, but instead making it up, or, as if often more the case, having it made up for you (…) when it comes to children and what we know as a culture about children, those who make it up dominate.” (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p. xiv)

Indeed, it is with this rather grave claim in mind that we might question how far ‘school readiness’ policies are rife with the kind of made-up, universal knowledge that Graue and Walsh (1998) describe.

Rather poignantly, I come to the end of this particular section wondering *how did I end up here?* How did I come to think about the relationship between care and curiosity? Therefore, I am inclined to agree; “Life (or ‘school readiness’) is never the same once one has been down a rabbit hole. *(*Fisher, 2000, p. 35). I *think* this journey began with my wonderings about the transformation of clay into ‘Down the Rabbit’ holes, but then it twisted and turned in rather unexpected directions. I’ve thought about the possibility that clay ‘invites’ children to care (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Boucher, 2019). I’ve also thought about the curious act

of going ‘down a rabbit hole’ and how such a metaphor might prompt us to care differently about children. Although not explored here, I have even thought about how ‘Down the Rabbit Holes’ might encourage us to rethink the importance of ‘Bunny Club’ in terms of its possibilities for relational learning (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). And so, to end this section, I attempt to make sense of my rabbit hole adventure with the following questions: Where do caring children feature in conceptualisations of ‘school readiness’? And, how might children’s clay ideas help us to do caring otherwise? I return to these questions in the concluding chapter when I consider ways in which the findings of this project might have implications for classroom practice.

Children thinking about Children

This chapter will now focus on an idea that emerged during Ideas Club, when clay was used in combination with Beatrice Alemagna’s (2016) picture book ‘What is a Child?’ Although the idea to be discussed (Images 24 & 25) was only a very small moment in an after-school club that spanned for four weeks across three different schools, it has particular resonances with the previous section, which noted children’s acts of care in relation to ‘things’ and animals. Indeed, it was my *thinking with* ‘Bunny Rabbit Holes’ that changed my thinking about other ideas that emerged during children’s clay encounters. I will briefly outline the context of the idea and then go on to describe how the idea might disrupt taken-for-granted ways of thinking about children and their development.

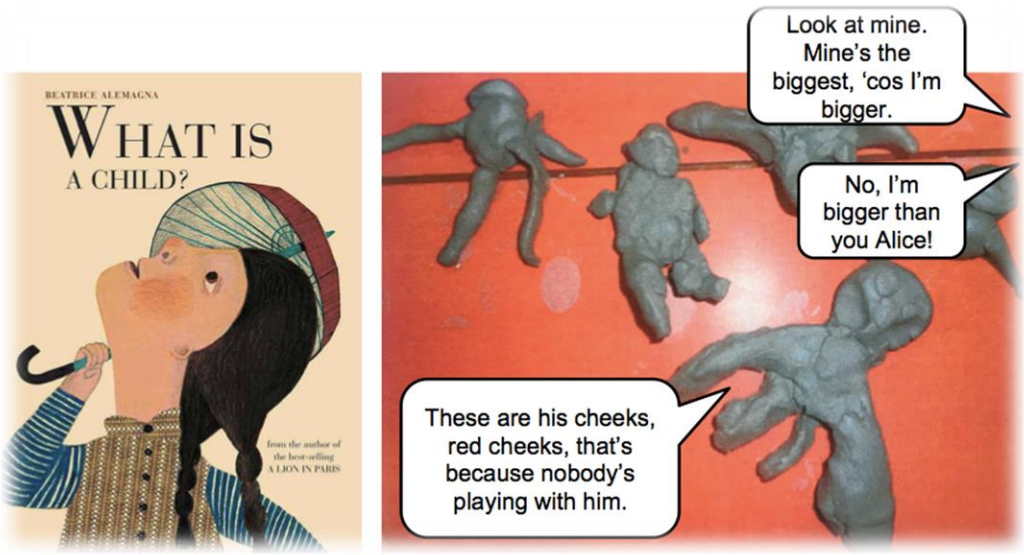


Image 24. A 'flavour' of children's clay models, which were moulded in response to the question 'What is a child?

The activity in question was designed in a more structured way compared to 'Bunny Rabbit Holes'; it involved sharing the front cover of Alemagna's (2016) book and asking the children to respond with clay in response to the book title, 'What is a Child?' I hoped working with clay would facilitate a certain slowing down of time to allow children to think through this question, though I now understand this process to be much more complex than first appreciated:

"To describe a body in a particular moment, we can describe, for example, a child, but the child is continually shifting and changing. These connections are formed through bodied relations, where thinking takes place. Thinking is what connects bodies, as it is through thinking that we relate. Thinking also takes place between body and environment." (Clark, 2012, p. 133)

When prompted, children began working individually with clay, moulding, shaping and transforming it into models of children. As the children worked, a voice recorder was used to capture their responses. Some of these responses can be seen in Image 24. It is important to point out that I only carried out this more 'adult-led' activity in two of the three schools that took part in Ideas Club. This is because I came to see children's open-ended explorations as a more valuable way of grappling with the question 'What is a Child?' Consequently, I used only open-ended activity with clay in the third school. Using a picture book as part of this task was prompted by my aim to create an 'affective atmosphere' through my use of a variety of resources. I also thought that the question 'What is a Child?' was rather philosophical in nature. Therefore I hoped the children's responses might help me challenge taken-for-granted 'teacher-as-usual' (Davies and Hunt, 1994) ways of thinking about children. Given these aims, it is useful to consider Murris' (2015) claim that certain picture books can be used to foster imaginative, intergenerational philosophical dialogues, and to promote pedagogies that enact a post-human theoretical framework:

"It is the aesthetic quality of picture books such as Anthony Browne's that makes them such sophisticated educational resources for posthuman enquiries with young children, and with the right kind of pedagogy, they can help problematize the meaning of salient conceptual distinctions (e.g., nature/culture, human/non-human, child/adult, real/fantasy). The use of these binary opposites and the meaning we bring to these concepts in class is far from politically innocent as they inform our (sometimes discriminatory) attitudes and actions." (p. 60)

While I did not introduce Alemagna's (2016) picture book to encourage children to interrogate the conceptual distinctions Murris (2015) describes, it is possible that the narrative and aesthetic context I provided will have shifted the focus from one that prioritizes a factual approach to a fictional one. Consequently, some of the children's responses felt somewhat story-like in nature, such as in the case of the idea I have called 'Red Cheeks' (Image 25).

"These are his cheeks, red cheeks, that's because nobody's playing with him."

Image 25. Red Cheeks

It wasn't until after this becoming of clay into 'Red Cheeks' during Ideas Club (Image 25) that I noticed the red cheeks of the child illustrated upon the front cover of Alemagna's (2016) picture book (Image 24). I therefore wondered if the creator of 'Red Cheeks' had transformed the clay as an affect of the front cover or whether this was a coincidence. Interestingly, looking further through

Alemagna's (2016) book, nearly all the children are illustrated with red cheeks (Image 26), and yet the Ideas Club children were not shown these pages until after they had finished working with clay. Noticing all these red cheeks led me to wonder about their significance. Did Alemagna (2016) use red cheeks for aesthetic or sentimental reasons? Or was Alemagna (2016) trying to convey something of children's propensity to be affected by the world around them? - A propensity that evades capture by 'school readiness' measures. With these musings in mind, I turn briefly to some of Alemagna's (2016) text:

"Children don't always like going to school. Often children prefer to close their eyes and sniff the grass, to shout and chase pigeons, to listen to the faraway voice of shells, to wrinkle up their noses in front of the mirror."

"Children come in all shapes and sizes. The children who decide not to grow up will never grow up. They keep a mystery inside them. So that even as grown-ups they will be moved by little things: a ray of sunshine or a snowflake."

Image 26. The red-cheeked children of Alemagna's (2016) picture book.

While Alemagna's (2016) descriptions have a rather romantic, sentimental quality they also provide a welcome antithesis to 'school readiness' discourse in the way they speak of children's curiosity and their material-spatial-embodied intra-actions with the world. At the same time Alemagna's (2015) descriptions appear to communicate something of the "small, low-key, happenstance things, moments, events, experiences and emotions that matter in (children's) everyday lives" (Horton and Kraftl, 2006, p. 260). Similar small everyday occurrences appeared to matter to the child who created the Tortoise classroom as seen in Image 12 of Chapter 4: *"This is the classroom and that's the **door** to get out the classroom. This is the **window** part where everyone can see it snowing outside".* Perhaps the significance of 'Red Cheeks' lies in this realm too.

The Intensities of the Ordinary

"Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects…" (Stewart, 2007)

A tapping on my leg, a pull on my coat, a sad face looks up. The becoming of clay into 'Red Cheeks' is reminiscent of many classroom and playground encounters I have had with children, when tear-sodden and red-cheeked they have appeared by my side in anguish about being on their own. In this way 'Red Cheeks' could appear an ordinary experience in so much that it captures something of the 'everydayness' (Horton, 2008) of my school experiences with children. Yet for Horton (2008), it is in these 'small' messy everyday moments where ethical events unfold:

"…everyday ethical incidents constantly arise; there is always already something more one could worry about; there is always another fine mess one could get into..." (p. 378)

This way of thinking emphasises the ethical nature of my encounters with 'red-cheeked' children and the importance of attending to the 'ordinary':

"The ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveliness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life." (Stewart, 2007)

Indeed, with Stewart (2007) the ordinariness of 'Red Cheeks' feels less ordinary when she reminds us that each everyday moment is a heterogeneous singularity, in which forms of power and meaning become lodged. The idea that a moment can morph into a 'cold, dark edge, or give way to something unexpectedly hopeful*'* (Stewart, 2007, p. 4) also highlights in a rather chilling way the possible significance for a child of being on their own, and the moral imperative of our actions in these moments. In Horton and Kraftl's (2006) study, it was the small, somewhat ordinary acts of kindness offered by staff in a Sure Start Centre that constituted its caring atmosphere. For Horton and Kraftl (2006), these small, kind gestures were also seen as everyday 'activisms' brought about by the threat of the Sure Start Centre's closure. In the same way, small, kind gestures in encounters with 'red-cheeked' children could be construed as a resistance to particular values that 'school readiness' policy

attempts to engender in children, such as managing their emotions appropriately:

"Personal, social and emotional development involves helping children to develop a positive sense of themselves, and others; to form positive relationships and develop respect for others; to develop social skills and learn how to manage their feelings; to understand appropriate behaviour in groups; and to have confidence in their own abilities" (DfE, 2017, p. 8)

The subtle, yet powerful mention of 'red cheeks' in this particular becoming of clay offers certain parallels with 'Bunny Rabbit Holes' given that it is a rather caring characterisation of loneliness, and of one child's empathy for another. This working with clay could therefore be perceived as another act of care and a documenting of the emotionality of the school day. Yet, children's red cheeks are perhaps made even more interesting when they are thought of in terms of affect rather than emotion, as Watkins (2011) did in her exploration of teachers' tears. For Watkins, (2011), the tears that were shed by teachers in interviews about the profession were an indication of the intensity of human relations, the affectivity of the profession, and the ethics of care the teachers embodied. When children's red cheeks are thought of as an 'intensity' in the same way, or as an embodied state (Conradson and McKay, 2007), we are reminded of children's physical investment in their school day, and the way interactions within classrooms 'allow for the transmission of powerful affects':

"*It is not surprising then that affect frames Spinoza's Ethics. It is the stuff of life, primarily relationally derived and very much so in terms of pedagogic relationships such as teacher and student and caregiver and child. There is an ethical dimension to this relationality, a necessary dependency upon another…"* (Watkins, 2011, p. 142)

Stewart's (2007) writing also points to the power of 'ordinary', everyday affects; they are things that happen; they are "immanent, obtuse and erratic" (p.3); "their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible" (p.3); unwanted intensities can 'simmer up' at the least provocation, yet a "tiny act of human kindness can set things right" (Stewart, 2007, p.47). To read about the 'intensities of the ordinary' (Stewart, 2007), as offered here, reminded me of my capacities to affect, and be affected, during my encounters with children. My actions do not dissipate, they move beyond the space in which they were generated, they have the power to create an affective link between myself and a child, and they indicate my investment in the process. Relationships really do matter. However, Stewart's (2007) writing also made me think rather despondently about the potential barriers that stand in the way of attending so committedly to 'ordinary' everyday affects; barriers that take the form of neoliberal reforms and child-centered pedagogies; forms of representational thinking that slide over and obscure the heterogeneous and non-coherent nature of our everyday lives (Stewart, 2007); barriers that complicate the highly intensive and ethical dimension of school relationships, (Watkins, 2011, p. 142). And perhaps this is why the transformation of clay into 'Red Cheeks' resonated so strongly with me, because it evoked notions of

relationships and care, and of the important and rewarding aspects of my teaching role that felt compromised because of other things I was 'called to do':

"…I don't think for the most part we actually choose what matters to us as intellectual workers. I think we somehow come to terms with what we are called to do (…) I don't think we sit down and decide what's important very much. I think we somehow come to terms with what's going on, and the method of working is relentlessly collaborationist." (Haraway, interviewed by Gane, 2006, p. 155).

When applied to teaching, Haraway's (2006) use of the term 'relentlessly collaborationist' feels both sensationalist and apt, for it resonates with the feelings I experienced prior to my decision to leave teaching. Work I was 'called to do' (as a result of 'school readiness' pressures) was frequently misaligned with what 'mattered' to me, which was to be 'affectively present' (Marshall and Hooker, 2016) in 'the things that happen' (Stewart, 2007, p.2) in children's everyday lives.

Although not pursued in the Ideas Club session, it is possible to see how 'Red Cheeks' could be used as a provocation to pursue further philosophical dialogue with children, such as with the question, "*Do adults get lonely too?"* Philosophical discussions are argued to be a valuable medium for putting things in perspective and satisfying children's 'hunger for meaning' (Lipman, 2008). Pursuing the clay in this way would also align with Murris' (2015) vision for a moral education in which *thinking with* and *being alongside* children opens up

spaces where boundaries between adults and children are blurred (as informed by Haraway's post-human philosophies). Murris' (2000) view is that young children are able to discuss the same kinds of problems and questions as academic philosophers. Attempts to conceive children as 'natural philosophers' have also been made:

"…many young children naturally raise questions, make comments and even engage in reasoning that professional philosophers recognise as philosophical. Not only do they do they do philosophy naturally, they do it with a freshness of perspective and a sensitivity to puzzlement…" (Matthews, 1994, p. 122)

However, not everyone shares this view for there are critics who have claimed that children lack the experiences and higher order thinking skills required to do philosophy (e.g. Flay, 1978 White, 1992). Such reservations might well have been influenced by Piagetian theory (1936) because in his view, children's reasoning capacities remain rather rudimentary in the earlier phases of their development (Lipman, 1976). Critical of Piagetian theory, Lipman (1976) further explained that:

"It does not allow for acceleration of education in thinking. And it suggests that because the child thinks concretely in a certain sense in his early years, that his instruction during this period should likewise be concrete." (p. 6)

Coming back to 'Red Cheeks', I am inclined to argue that this particular transformation of clay challenges Piagetian assumptions, and the view that

children cannot ‘do’ philosophy. This is because ‘Red Cheeks’ speaks to me of empathy and intelligence, an intelligence that married the affective matter of being lonely with the embodied response of having red cheeks. Using Deleuze (cited in Goncalves, 2018) we might even call this an ‘involuntary intelligence’ – a transcendent intelligence that comes to life when it ‘undergoes the pressure’ of interpreting worldly signs. It is therefore not a question of whether children can ‘do’ philosophy, it is a question of how young children’s intelligence and philosophical thinking can be provoked. Was it the clay or Alegmagna’s (2015) picture book that provoked the ‘involuntary intelligence’ in the becoming of “Red Cheeks”? Or had the child remembered an encounter with a lonely red-cheeked friend? For ‘Red Cheeks’ to have triggered such wonderings aligns rather well with Deleuze’s assertion (cited in Goncalves, 2018) that, **“**More important than thought is ‘what leads to thought’” **(**p. 95), a view that might just shift the way we think about children’s ‘school readiness’ – more important than what a child ‘can do’, are the ways that we can foster their intelligence.

In the previous paragraph I intimated that the transformation of clay into ‘Red Cheeks’ had prompted me to think about empathy in relation to young children. Such a discussion warrants the mention of Piaget’s (1986) notion of ‘egocentricity’, a logic that suggests that children up to 7 years of age assume other people to feel the same as them. Unsurprisingly, this concept has been heavily criticised for underestimating young children’s abilities (Whitebread, 2012, Halpenny and Pettersen, 2014). More positive pictures of young children’s empathetic abilities have since been offered by writers such as

Whitebread (2012), who have highlighted the significance of recent research in this area:

"What crucially emerges from all this research in relation to educational practice, however, is that, during their early years, children are very significantly engaged in beginning to understand their own and others' emotions." (p. 29)

As an implication of this research, it is now considered good practice for practitioners to provide opportunities for children in their early years education to experience and discuss their emotions (Halpenny and Pettersen, 2014). While it could be argued that 'Red Cheeks' offers another important antithesis to Piagetian theory, I am mindful that many of these more positive discussions of children's empathetic abilities have emerged from the field of developmental psychology. I am also wary that empathy has been implicated as an important prerequisite for children's 'school readiness' and later academic success (Webster-Stratton and Reid, 2004). Given these concerns, and my aim to see 'school readiness' differently, I turn once again to Deleuzian-inspired research to think about 'Red Cheeks' and children's capacities.

Marshall and Hooker (2016) used a Deleuzian theoretical framework to explore the question *'What can empathied bodies do?'* They asked this question in relation to medical care and their concern that empathy (when conceived in a rationalist, cognitive way) is simply used to 'add on' the 'psychosocial' dimensions of illness:

"…existing models of medical empathy suppose a pre-existing and separated doctor and patient who are thought to interact through limited mechanism of communication: either body language, written or vocalised languaged" (Marshall and Hooker, 2016, p.10-11).

In this model of empathy, bodies are missing and emotions are also considered 'troublesome' (Marshall and Hooker, 2016). Accordingly, Marshall and Hooker (2016) challenged this limited construction with their view that empathies are individual, singular, emergent, and are brought together when intensities between bodies arise. For medical students and doctors, this view of affective empathy has significant implications:

"…promoting empathy may mean taking measures to ensure that the doctor and patient are affectively present, to reduce affective states that might impede affective engagement (anxiety, stress, inattention, depression) and to allow medical students and doctors (probably unquantifiable) ways of being that are open to affectedness." (Marshall and Hooker, 2016, p.11)

Consequently, when empathy is considered to be time and space dependent, and unique in its emergence, in the way Marshall and Hooker (2016) describe, space is opened up for thinking about 'Red Cheeks' as having captured something of a singular 'empathetic happening' – an event that was 'productive', 'transformative' and 'felt' (Marshall and Hooker, 2016), an event which consisted of a unique 'coming-together' of bodies, space and time, as well as bodies, books and clay, an event that provoked an 'involuntary intelligence' (Deleuze, 2000) and a transformation of clay. 'Red Cheeks' has

therefore left me feeling that empathy for young children really does *happen*, and is powerful and complex in its form. Perhaps this is because children, as read by Deleuze, embody affect in a way that is lost to most adults (Hickey-Moody, 2013, Fancy, 2018). Consequently, when empathy, and other of children's capacities are as contingent as I've described, then how is it possible to make rational, static judgements about children's 'school readiness'?

If this discussion were to stop here, there is a danger that 'Red Cheeks' might still only be taken as 'evidence' of young children's ability to empathise, as is orthodox in Western culture. In a deliberate move away from this line of thinking, I wish to take heed of Deleuze's efforts to express the instability of thought, to stress that empathy is an unpredictable and 'temporary configuration' (Marshall and Hooker, 2016, p. 9). Empathy can therefore not be understood as purely cognitive, or a 'possession' that young children *have* in different developmental measures (Marshall and Hooker, 2016). Nor can it be taught formally through the curriculum. By contrast, there appears something more valuable in taking the view that children's bodies 'become empathied' (Marshall and Hooker, 2016) because a becoming ontology "sharpens attention to the possibility of change" (Mayes, 2015, p. 15). When we take this view we might be more cognizant of the multiple ways in which a body can be empathetic, and the kind of affective states that might impede affective engagement with children. Implicating the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming' also deconstructs conventional conceptions of empathy that assume a stable identity, and reduce empathy to sameness and shared experience (Lather,

2008), because ‘becoming’ always lingers ‘in the middle of difference’ (Wels, 2013, p. 160):

“We have to approach the face of another as a face, as that which exceeds my own knowledge and grasp, not as an instrumental thing to be assimilated into the same.” (Bollmer, 2017, p. 70)

In this way, Red Cheeks is no longer seen as an expression of one child’s ability to *understand* the experience of another, because this kind of knowledge is unobtainable (Bollmer, 2017), it is seen as an openness to the experience of another, “*to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel*”’ (Ahmed, 2014, p.24), and perhaps it is in this difference that we come to care for others.

Children as Sponges

Deleuze (1997) acknowledged, via a different reading of Spinoza, that children are constituted by two poles - capacity and vulnerability (Fancy, 2018). Fancy (2018) suggested that these two poles work in tandem to make children especially powerful experimenters and risk-takers. To bring this section to a close, I return to a page of Alemagna’s (2016) picture book, which offers something of a similar acknowledgement:

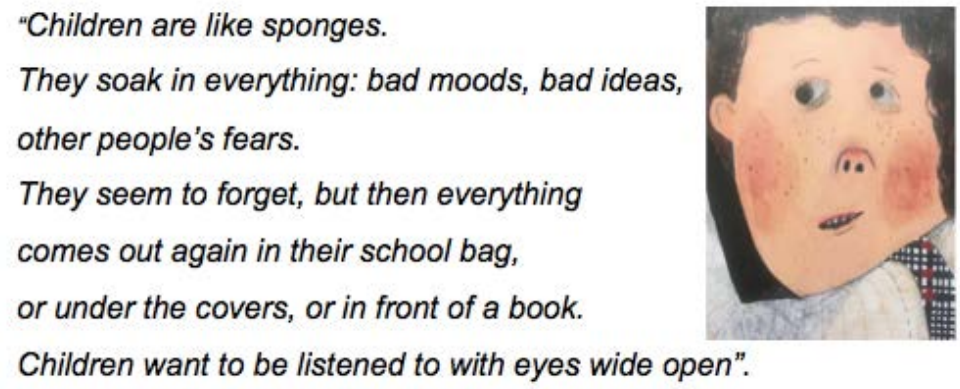


Image 26. Children are like sponges

Indeed, Alemagna's (2016) suggestion that children soak up 'bad moods' (Image 26) and 'bad ideas' does not seem far removed from Deleuze's description of children's capacity to be vulnerable and negatively impacted by the world around them. By bringing together these ideas, 'Red Cheeks' can also be presented as a kind of soaking up, for there feels something *soaked up* by the child with red cheeks and by the child who transformed the clay so powerfully. It is hoped that this analysis of red cheeks has expanded space for complex ways of thinking about children, which deliberately move away from conceptualisations that relate 'readiness' to static goals, outcomes and identities. As Osberg and Biesta (2010, p. 2) write, complex ways of thinking make it possible to see "the non-linear, unpredictable and generative character of educational processes and practices in a positive light, focusing on the emergence of meaning, knowledge and understanding". Only then can 'readiness' be understood more complexly so as a "coordination of haecceities" (p. 49) and as "the conditions necessary to allow a departure from predetermined norms" (Evans, 2015, p. 50).

Before moving on to discuss another transformation of clay (The Pearl and the Platform) I would like to share several other answers that the children gave in response to the question 'What is a child?' (Figure 4). To be clear, I did not ask this question to find out what a child *is*? For it is my view that children are 'emergent becomings' (Evans, 2015) that are not knowable in this way. I was more interested in opening up multiple understandings of children and to find out about the things that matter to them. Perhaps these answers would also offer Dr Xargle (Willis, 1988) some interesting material for teaching his class of aliens about earthlets.

Figure 4. Children's responses to Alemagna's picture book

On face value, these comments reveal that key rings, birthdays and play *matter* to children. Should we therefore be doing more to respect and foster children's play? And briefly, I wonder here, what does a key ring *do* for a child? Given that children's school bags are all the same, maybe a key ring gives them a chance to be different. Mention of 'grown-ups' is also interesting and could intimate that these children perceive adulthood as a fixed standard, an idea which was discussed by Dewey (1916, p. 46):

"Our tendency to take immaturity as mere lack, and growth as something which fills up the gap between the immature and the mature is due to regarding childhood comparatively (…) this fixes the attention on what the child has not, and will not have till he becomes a man."

Following this view, the most intriguing comment for me is that children have to go to school because 'they don't know much', a comment that invokes Locke's (1690) pronouncements about the child's mind as a blank slate. Pertinently, Moss (2012) argues that this particular image of the child is invoked in the discourse of 'school readiness' with the child seen as needing to be filled with pre-determined knowledge, skills and values. We might suppose that this construction of the child has therefore been soaked up, as revealed in the comment above. Yet, I cannot help but think about the child who said it, something that I've tried to not to do during my analysis. This is a child I've come to know well through my supply teaching. My perception of him is that he is a highly intelligent individual who regularly says striking things about the world around him. As such, the comment should not necessarily be read

inauspiciously as if the child has this view of himself. Instead, we might consider it be a very astute and power-full critique of education, 'school readiness' policy and his place within this system:

"Teachers keep things going despite everything, but pupils are, below a surface of politeness and submission, very critical of the system." (Cullingford, 2006, p. 211).

And it is with this understanding - that children are highly intelligent and power-full individuals - that I move on to the analysis of a story called The Pearl and the Platform, which has been read as another thought-provoking transformation of clay. This analysis starts with a discussion of a Mexican folk tale, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the child's story.

The Pearl and the Platform

"*Kino held the great pearl in his hand, and it was warm and alive in his hand. And the music of the pearl had merged with the music of the family so that one beautified the other."* (Steinbeck, 1947, p. 25)

There is a Mexican folktale called 'The Pearl', which tells the story of a poor fisherman who encounters sudden fame and fortune, after uncovering a valuable pearl. Unfortunately for the man, he soon discovers that wealth and good fortune do not always go hand in hand. John Steinbeck (1947) retold this story in a parable of the same name. In Steinbeck's (1947) retelling he

describes how “the essence of pearl mixed with essence of men and a curious dark residue was precipitated”, for the great and beautiful pearl becomes a target of greed. There are also several descriptions that suggest a connective relationship between the fisherman and nature - “Kino heard the little splash of morning waves on the beach” - as drawn out in Caswell’s (2005) analysis. Those who have analysed Steinbeck’s (1947) work (Morris, 1963, Meyer, 2005) have pointed to the allegorical journey on which the protagonist embarks, and the way children are identified with the valuable pearl. Steinbeck’s (1947) epigraph also raises interesting questions about the multiplicity of meanings, which underlie the text:

“And because the story has been told so often, it has taken root in every man's mind. And as with all retold tales that are in people's hearts, there are only good and bad things and black and white things and good and evil things and no in-between anywhere.”

I include this mention of Steinbeck’s (1947) tale because of the way it resonates so curiously with one child’s transformation of clay into ‘The Pearl and the Platform’ (Image 27) - a resonance that will hopefully become apparent in the preceding analysis. Yet, this is not my only motivation for including Steinbeck’s (1947) work. A second reason is linked to the way Steinbeck’s (1947) epigraph spoke to me of ‘school readiness’ - a ‘retold tale’ in which there is ready and unready, black and white and nowhere in-between. Perhaps this is an arbitrary link to make, but as Steinbeck (1947) points out, ‘The Pearl’ is a parable from which readers should take their own meaning and read their own life into it. Moving forward Steinbeck’s (1947) tale will be used to support my diffractive

analysis of ‘The Pearl and the Platform’, for a diffractive analysis is a way of working that “spreads thought in unpredictable patterns producing different knowledge” (Mazzei, 2014, p. 742).

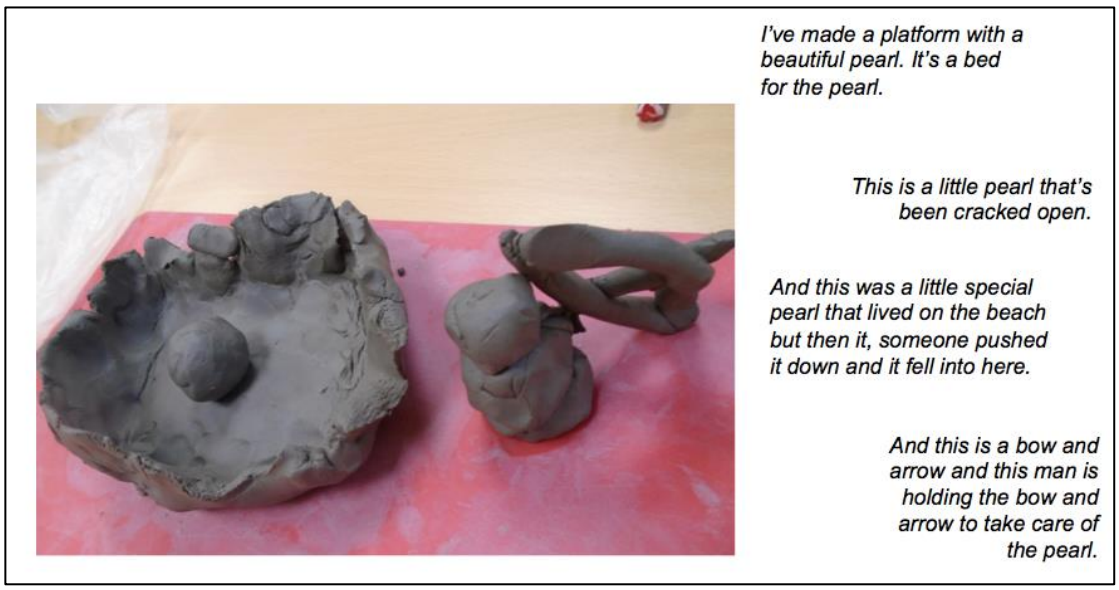


Image 27. The Pearl and the Platform

Being Imaginative

One of the most significant of children’s ideas to provoke wonder’ can be seen in Figure 27, in the image entitled ‘The Pearl and the Platform’. At the time of its emergence, this clay model ‘felt’ important because of the highly imaginative narrative the child produced independently of adult-driven outcomes. Since then, having re-listened to the audio recording several times, complex questions about care and clay have emerged, such is the effect of having used diffractive analysis. It is Fredriksen’s opinion (2011) that young children experience 3D materials with emotion and imagination. However, we can never know what children feel and think; we can only imagine and suggest what takes place inside their minds and bodies (Fredriksen, 2011). In line with this view,

‘The Pearl and the Platform’ is offered here as a resource for generating new questions about ‘school readiness’, rather than finding answers.

In curriculum guidelines for educators who work with Reception children, (EYFS, DfE, 2017) ‘Being Imaginative’ is listed as the last of the framework’s Early Learning Goals, suggesting that children’s imaginative endeavours are a moderately valued prerequisite of ‘school readiness’. To meet the required standard in this area, a child must have demonstrated their ability to use media and materials ‘in original ways’ and have found ways to express their ‘own ideas, thoughts and feelings’ (EYFS, 2017). ‘The Pearl and the Platform’ could therefore be read as a valuable piece of evidence of a child’s development in this area for it presents as an original and imaginative transformation of clay. Yet a focus on imagination in educational terms is not necessarily positive when imagination is used as ‘proof of some predetermined intellectual achievement’ (Knight, 2013, p. 255). Speaking about children’s drawings, Knight (2013) further elaborated that:

“…seeking evidence of imagination or the imaginary in children’s visual works as a determinate of developmental growth is an interpretive analysis, and doesn’t acknowledge what might actually prompt what is contained in a drawing.” (p. 255)

Driven by these concerns, Knight (2013) used Deleuze’s critiques of imagination as a conceptual entryway for rethinking children’s drawings, for Deleuze suggested that imagination “is not innate, but legislated and authorised by constructed notions of taste.’ (p. 255) Reframing imagination as induced by

unpredictable events and conditions (e.g. light, temperature, mood, surroundings, purpose, body movements) also helped Knight (2013) contest the notion that children's imaginative outputs are indicative of a predetermined developmental milestone. 'The Pearl and the Platform' in the Deleuzian sense therefore takes on a different orientation, no longer conceived as evidence of a child's imagination *a priori*, but rather a 'visual capture of a moment in time' (Knight, 2013) during which imagination was schematized 'only for a speculative purpose' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 57). This is not to say that developmental logic would have downplayed the significance of 'The Pearl and the Platform' (probably quite the opposite), it is that developmental logic might have reduced 'The Pearl and the Platform' to already established meanings, at the expense of celebrating the contingent nature of its emergence and the significant work that clay played in this process.

Reviewing the 'The Pearl and the Platform' through the framework of the EYFS (DfE, 2017) led me to reflect on several other of its Early Learning Goals, including that of reading and writing. This is because the child and clay told a story, a story of a pearl and a platform, and of a man with a bow and arrow. As remarkable as this story appears, a story told through words and clay alone does not appear to be legislated by the framework's goals for Literacy, given that they relate rather narrowly to the printed word and a child's ability to read and write simple sentences – an interpretation often referred to as 'school-based literacy' (Masny, 2009). In this sense the EYFS (DfE, 2017) is at odds with complex understandings of literacy learning, such as those posed by

Multiple Literacies Theory, which locates multiplicity at the heart of literate communication (Masny and Cole, 2009, p. 2):

"The problem in education is that systems are often designated as being closed or finite (…) Yet educators know that linear development in literacy skills is a myth, and that students develop at different rates, depending upon certain internal and environmental triggers."

Multiple Literacies Theory works at a local level in terms of 'local knowledge', affects and moments (Masny and Cole, 2009), values which align well with Knight's (2013) understanding of imagination and with my own framework for analysis, through which children's transformation of clay is valued as a fluid, transformative, and complex form of literacy. It is therefore my contention that with 'The Pearl and the Platform' understandings of literacy can be extended and transformed.

Immanent Learning

"In its own way, art says what children say. Children never stop talking about what they are doing or trying to do: exploring millieus, by means of dynamic trajectories, and drawing up maps of them." (Deleuze, 1997, p. 61)

In simple terms, 'The Pearl and the Platform' could be thought of as a story, or it could be connected to the area of the EYFS (DfE, 2017) called 'Expressive Arts and Design'. The latter certainly seems an easier fit, given that school-based literacy does not so readily embrace the complex and ethereal qualities that this transformation of clay offers. Thinking of 'The Pearl and the Platform'

as an artwork is not necessarily unhelpful however, not when researchers such as Garoian, (2014) have used Deleuzian thinking to characterise art as a complex, singular and disjunctive encounter, through which new knowledge emerges. Interestingly, Garoian (2014) also considered the possibilities that arise when the seemingly disparate and dissimilar cultural events of teaching and art constitute a semblance, like that described by Deleuze (1995):

"…the events of teaching and art-making constitute the nascent processes of subjectification: becoming-teacher and becoming-artist that is contingent on how one might live rather than how one should live, which evokes the Nietzschean ethos of "inventing new possibilities of life. Existing not as a subject but as a work of art." (p. 95)

So for Garoian (2014) when teaching is seen, as an event of immanence, (like art) creativity and unpredictability are no longer impeded by preprogramed activity. Instead, moments of uncertainty and crises are valued, because it is recognised that these moments call upon teachers and children to provide experimental and improvisational responses and thus enable unforeseen ways of learning to emerge (Garoian, 2013). Felman, (1992) likewise explained the connection between teaching and crisis:

"If teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught." (Felman, 1992, p. 53)

Linking back to Fancy's (2018) discussion of 'becoming-child', teachers' own willingness to be vulnerable appears key to this approach. Could it be that the 'The Pearl and the Platform' supports teaching becoming an art-like Deleuzian event? Might it also be that 'The Pearl and the Platform' presents us with a flavour of 'immanent learning' (Garoian, 2013), the kind that might occur when predetermined activity is removed and classrooms become a more generative arts-like space? For me, it is exciting to think that this might be the case.

Thinking still about 'The Pearl and the Platform' as a work of art, Allan's (2007) discussion of art and inclusion lends itself well to supporting the links made by Garoian (2014) between art and teaching. In her discussion Allan (2007) suggests that artwork undertaken by young children is a form of experimentation that opens up experiences that are not yet known to themselves or their teachers. Allan (2007) also uses the term 'fabulation' to describe children's art work, a term put to work by Deleuze, and then Braidotti (2000) to describe "a fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that world in some cognitive way." (Braidotti, 2000, p. 47) For Beier (2013), 'fabulation' can be used to think about the potential of art to intervene in the present and change the future. In other words, we might allow art to change us in some way (Beier, 2013). This approach displaces the rather more conventional act of looking to an artwork for its inherent meaning (Beier, 2013). When 'The Pearl and the Platform' is also thought of as a fabulation or a 'productive force' (Beier, 2013, p. 40) we are encouraged to move away from asking "What does it mean?" toward asking "What can it do?" When we make this shift, space for the

following kinds of questions is opened up: Can ‘The Pearl and the Platform’ help us imagine new eventful forms of teaching? Can it also help us imagine new possibilities for literacy learning? As a final point, it is interesting that in her research exploring theatre workshops, Allan (2007), found that the children in her study could identify differences between being taught by artists compared to teachers. In the workshop the children felt they were encouraged to be more inventive compared to school, and they felt they were shown a greater level of respect. On account of these differences, it is not surprising that Allan (2007) shows support for the development of a curriculum that includes more emphasis on art activities. Given the magical transformation of clay into ‘The Pearl and the Platform’ I am inclined to agree that art activities have great potential for children’s learning.

So far I have talked rather disparately about ‘The Pearl and the Platform’ as a story and as an artwork. Yet these two areas should not necessarily be talked about separately in the way curriculum frameworks do. In fact, making a distinction between art and literacy is likely to limit the possibilities of knowledge that could be made available for thinking about ‘The Pearl and the Platform’. A blurring between art and literacy can be seen in the work of Kuby *et al*. (2015) who observed children working with tissue paper, foam board, string, pipe cleaners and other materials as part of a writing workshop. The intra-actions Kuby *et al*. (2015) observed between children and materials were used by the authors to expand definitions of writing and literacy learning, because in their view “creating with materials was writing – not an add-on of art stuff to writing as a privileged mode of communicating.” (p. 397) Multiple Literacies Theory has

also read art in connection with literacy in an effort by researchers to expand understandings of literacy that are influenced too readily by psychology and applied linguistics. When one child's painting became a story in Masny's (2011) study, Masny (2011) used Multiple Literacies Theory to describe this transformation as an 'intensive reading'. At the same time, Masny (2011) acknowledged that the event in which the story occurred is complex and 'unknowable':

"As intensive reading of the painting is happening, a story becomes. Is it the thought of creating a story that is actualized as the reading of the painting happens?" (Masny, 2011)

What Masny (2011) is trying to convey here is that connections between art and literacy do not happen unproblematically. They interact on a plane of immanence (Masny, 2011). They provide nomadic pathways of learning (Masny, 2011). Comparably, the emergence of 'The Pearl and the Platform' does not make for easy 'reading' given the way clay and story emerged simultaneously in an equally unknowable way, but it is perhaps because of this complex interaction that such creativity emerged – a "creativity beyond the given." (Masny, 2011, p.502)

Returning to Care

As part of an arts-based ethnographic study, Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*. (2017) experimented with children's clay encounters in an early childhood centre and

in river and forest environments. Encouraged by this research, and its framework of materiality and relationality, I will now discuss my curiosity about the transformation of clay into a pearl and a platform (Image 27), a curiosity that displaces knowable, developmental ways of thinking. For me, this transformation of clay is curious because a pearl itself is a product of an entirely natural and unique transformation. As a result of this process, pearls are regarded as beautiful, valuable and natural objects. Remarkably, the valuable qualities of a pearl are emphasised in 'The Pearl and the Platform' in several ways: through the creation of a platform (otherwise described as a bed), with the addition of a man with a bow and arrow, the pearl's protector, and in the child's description of the pearl as little and beautiful:

I've made a platform with a beautiful pearl.
This is a little pearl that's been cracked open.
And this was a little special pearl that lived on the beach…
And this is a bow and arrow and this man is holding the bow and arrow to take care of the pearl. (Emphasis added)

How did the child know about the value of pearls? Had they read about them in a story? Had they seen them in a film? Can this transformation of clay into a pearl, a platform, and a protector also be thought of as another act of caring? Such questions are inspired by the work of Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*. (2017) who raised similar ideas when they saw clay being attended to meticulously by two children (Neeta and Carly) whilst out in the forest. During this encounter the children shaped clay into marshmallows, poked them into sticks and roasted them in a fire. As they 'followed clay', Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*. (2017) began to

see the children's marshmallows as a 'betrayal' of clay – a way of working with clay that complicates clay as a material of consumption, for materials are often only seen as instrumental resources for children's development (Hodgins, 2014). Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*. (2017) also suggested that the children's care of clay was at odds with capitalist narratives of care, which render work with young children as a labour integral:

"This act (Neeta and Carly's) tells us educators and researchers that there is more in the world than capital modes of production. Roasting clay marshmallows allows for the production of new subjectivities, relationships, social configurations." (p. 63)

Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al*. (2017) appear to be proposing that a humanist notion of care is not enough, rather care should be seen as a 'material vital doing' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p.90) as an affective, animated force (Barad, 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2010) and as an obligation to *pay attention* in a beyond-human way (Haraway, 2008; Hodgins, 2014). With these ideas in mind, 'The Pearl and the Platform' might also be used to challenge particular acts of caring, such as those that might be guided by 'school readiness' discourse, for the way the clay was transformed so thoughtfully into something so other-worldly could help us consider diverse ways in which we might care for children, such as to have curiosity for their complex, caring entanglements with the world.

My desire to want to think more about the caring worldly way in which clay was transformed during the 'The Pearl and the Platform' encounter led me down a further road of inquiry to explore Haraway's 'more-than-human' philosophies.

Such philosophies have been used by several researchers (Hodgins *et al*., 2019; Taylor *et al*., 2013) to make a case for new kinds of 'beyond-worldly' pedagogies, which help us think beyond the limits of the individual child. Hodgins *et al*. (2019) for example, discussed how we might craft the conditions for a 'care(ing) curriculum', a curriculum that not only acknowledges children's deep, care-filled connectedness to the world but recognises care as an ongoing attentiveness to complexity. As a second example, Taylor *et al*. (2013) used two dimensions of Haraway's (2008) theorising ('becoming worldly with' and 'response-ability'), to put forward a 'worlding approach to learning', a way of learning that requires us to think beyond our immediate human concerns, and to assist children to respond to the worldly challenges that lie ahead of them:

"This worlding approach to learning represents a move away from the sort of curriculum that would have autonomous individual children learn about things, to one that emphasises multidirectional human/non- human relationships, the need to acknowledge our shared response-abilities and learning with all of the others in our more-than-worlds." (Taylor *et al*., 2013)

Having reflected on Taylor and colleagues' (2013) research, it struck me that the 'The Pearl and the Platform' could also be used to think beyond our immediate human concerns given the worldly peculiarities of the story, peculiarities that might be construed as linking 'actual beings to actual response-abilities' (Harraway, 2016, p. 29). The pearl, according to its creator, had lived on a beach. Like the pearl, a beach is a product of nature, a landform composed of many natural materials such as sand and rock. The child also

described how the pearl had been pushed down from the beach (by someone) onto a platform, thus suggesting that the platform resides underground. Wanting to think deeply and differently about these ideas, I would propose that Haraway's conceptual framework allows for the 'The Pearl and the Platform' to appear as a complex entanglement of human and non-human elements, in which physical and geographical processes combine with people, such as the man with the bow and arrow. In this way, it could be understood that the clay allowed the child to express big, important ideas about the world, the likes of which might not have been thought about using pencil and paper alone. If it is also understood that the child was *thinking with* clay (as Haraway's work might lead us to appreciate) rather than *using* clay, then the imperative of giving children access to a range of materials is brought to the fore:

"It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories." (Haraway, 2016, p. 12)

Such a complex and interesting evocation serves as a useful reminder that hegemonic 'school ready' ways of thinking and practicing do not necessarily allow us to grapple and care for the true scope of children's ideas and the interesting ways children are already in relation 'with the world' (Rautio, 2013).

Returning to Steinbeck's parable of The Pearl (1947) appears a fitting end to my analysis, especially when we consider the similarities that exist between

‘The Pearl and the Platform’, and the illustrations that have appeared on various front covers of the story (Image 28). Yet how do such similarities

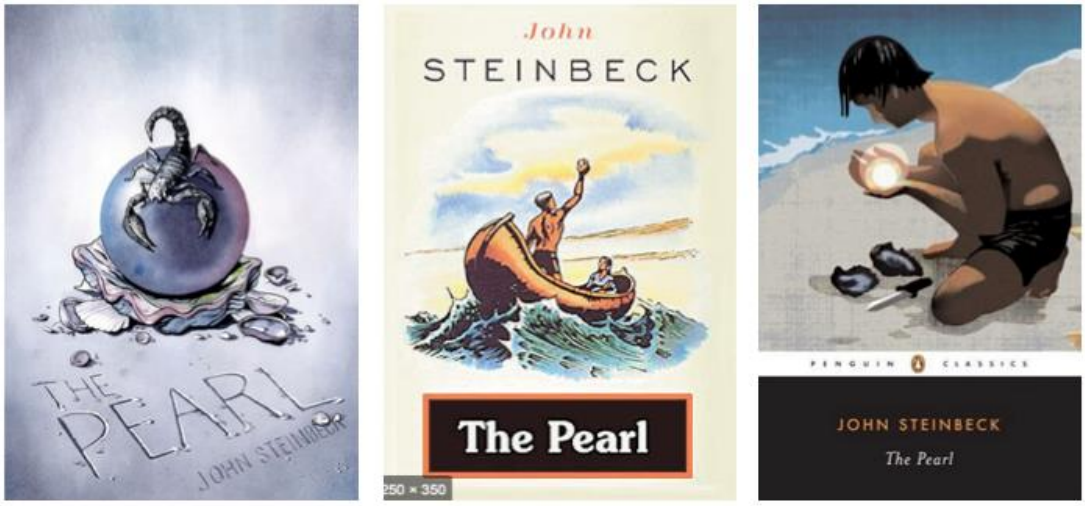


Image 28. The front covers of John Steinbeck’s (1947) ‘The Pearl’.

exist? On one front cover a man kneels on a beach with a pearl in his hand. The man appears to be Steinbeck’s (1947) fisherman, but he could just as easily be the protector of the pearl - a man who is protecting the pearl from the ‘evil coagulating about him’ (Steinbeck, 1947, p. 50). The man could also be about to ‘push’ the pearl down onto a ‘platform’ as a way of further protecting it from those seeking to benefit from its value. But these comparisons are mysterious, for it is unlikely that ‘The Pearl and the Platform’ was directly inspired by this story. Do these similarities therefore help challenge the view that adults are fundamentally different and more intelligent learners than children? I draw this conclusion because the child *with clay* produced a magical story of imagery, ambiguity and symbols, not that dissimilar to Steinbeck’s (1947). Can we also use these similarities to critique the logic of learning that the EYFS (DfE, 2017) and Year 1 National Curriculum represents? A way of

working that does not always acknowledge the subtleties of young children's intelligence. According to Cullingford (2007), this shortcoming is even acknowledged by the children themselves:

"From the pupils' point of view the system to which they are made to adapt is fundamentally flawed. It diminishes their capacities. It undermines their creativity. It strangles their intellectual adventure. This is not deliberate, but this is how it feels for the pupils." (p. 220)

One child's perceptive comment, seen earlier in Figure 4, which indicated that children have to go to school because they don't know much, would support Cullingford's (2007) views about the way education 'feels' for pupils. Cullingford's (2007) use of the term 'intellectual adventure' also feels a fitting way to describe my engagement with Reception children's ideas, and the journey I have been on with them.

This chapter has analysed children's work with clay using various theoretical ideas, including Haraway's (2015) more-than-human philosophies and Barad's (cited in Juelskjær & Schwennesen, 2003) notion of entanglements. It was only towards the end of the analysis process that I got to thinking about why children's entanglements with clay (rather than with other materials such as junk) had fascinated me so much. Upon reflection, there was something particularly magic about watching children use their brains and hands to work with clay. Perhaps this magic lies in clay's indeterminate, contingent nature, its plasticity, and its ability to become anything, to become ingrained in children's

fingernails and in the grooves of their skin. It has an open readiness that is different to the constrained way we think about 'school readiness', which parallels the development of my own research from Study One to Study Two. Like the children's ideas, clay is not fixed or knowable but quickly becomes concrete and a source of achievement and wonder. Perhaps working with clay also parallels with the way we should be thinking about children. As 'vectors of affect' (Hickey-Moody, 2013) children have the power to shape classroom life. At the same time, children are also not fixed, knowable entities; they are 'emergent becomings', a view that "shifts attention from the achievement of subjectified identity positions, towards notions of the self as a threshold or door…" (Evans, 2015, p. 42) Evans (2015) further explains that when children are seen in this way we can start thinking about 'readiness' not as an end goal but as the conditions necessary for a body to 'destratisfy' and to pursue lines of flight. With the findings of Study Two in mind, it would seem that clay help might well foster these kinds of conditions for children.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This chapter brings together discussions from Chapters 4 and 5 and considers how, taken as a whole, the project has added to the existing body of knowledge relating 'school readiness'. Implications for policy, practice and research are also considered.

Between Tick and Tock

Tick-tock, tick-tock. The city shouts, Hurry. Can't stop! No time!

But, high above the bustle, where weary wings take rest, are eyes that watch.

And hands that know – It's time to pause the clock.

And for one tiny moment, between tick and tock…

The city shudders to a STOP.

While the clock holds its breath, Liesel threads through the stillness.

In the picture book ‘Between Tick and Tock’ (Greig and Lindsay, 2018) we follow the story of Liesel, a young girl who notices things that the busy people of the city do not. So Liesel decides to pause the clock, to make them stop, to make them see what she does. It is in this space between the tick and tock that Liesel embarks on an adventure around the city, performing small acts of kindness for humans and animals alike. But the clock calls Liesel back because a city can’t stay stuck between the tick and the tock forever. Luckily when the ticks and tocks resume, the city feels different somehow, kinder, happier perhaps, as a result of Liesel’s efforts.

Between the tick and the tock feels an apt way to describe the space I have occupied over the last four years, thinking, researching and writing about ‘school readiness’ with the help of Reception children. This project has granted me the space to see things I hadn’t noticed before, in my busy life as a teacher – things about education, things about children and the complex lives they lead, things that we might we miss when we focus too inflexibly on children’s academic capabilities. Unfortunately most teachers are not granted this privilege, to step out of the classroom, to slow down time and to reflect on big questions about how we might do education differently if given the chance. Yet this does not mean they do not care about children. Teachers are simply getting on with the job of teaching, which in a neoliberal society inevitably involves being part of an effort to ‘raise standards’ (Ofsted, 2020), to deliver ‘quality and consistency (Ofsted, 2017), and, for some teachers, to provide the ‘right foundation’ of knowledge, skills and understanding to ensure children’s school readiness (DfE, 2017). Worryingly, this type of neo-liberalist thought has

become so entrenched that for many there is no alternative; this is simply the way the world operates (Sims, 2017; Davies and Bansel, 2007). So what if the pausing of time was possible? What would it mean for the neoliberal state if teachers were granted some space between the tick and the tock to reflect on questions of purpose in education, and on the images of children they hold? And should they have the time to read this thesis, to share in children's ideas, what would I like them to take away? Such questions form an important framework for this concluding chapter, a space in which I tease out implications for research and practice, and consider how Reception children's ideas contribute to the on-going debates about 'school readiness'. I address: (1) The value of professional conversations, as inspired by my discussions with Reception teachers, (2) 'Pedagogical slowness' (Bates, 2019) – the idea that we should slow down as a way of taking seriously the everyday things that matter to children, (3) the importance of attending to objects and matter, and (4) I conclude by considering alternative discourses of 'readiness' and the implications of this research for policy, practice and research.

Professional Conversations are Important

"We must take responsibility for examining the documents and discursive practices that are taken for granted in our schools and universities, and ask: what conditions of possibility are they creating and maintaining for us and for our students?" (Davies, 2006, p. 436)

While ‘school readiness’ might appear a positive and necessary objective for all young children to attain (Tager, 2017), it is a matter that requires teachers’ critical attention. It requires their attention because it has the potential to affect children’s lives, including how they are viewed and what decisions are made about them. It also has the potential to place young children ‘in the shadows’ at the margins of our classrooms. However, we also know that teachers seldom have the opportunity, time and space to question the ideas that shape their approaches (Cullingford, 2006). This means that hegemonic discourses such as ‘school readiness’, which revolve around efficiency and effectiveness have become ‘the grand narrative of our time’ (Moss, 2014, p. 60) because they resist alternative thinking and discourses. As a consequence, ‘broad patterns of subordination’ (Kenway *et al*., 1994, p. 190) and ‘compliance behaviours’ (Sims, 2017) exist in the sense that ‘school readiness’-driven practices are now commonplace in many early years settings. For example, many Reception children are now grouped by ability for phonics teaching as a means of raising pass scores in the Year One phonic screening test (Roberts-Holmes, 2019), and many schools have *“significantly increased their expectations for how reading, writing and mathematics are taught”* (Ofsted, 2017) since the implementation of the 2014 National Curriculum which saw targets for Year One attainment increase. Yet, teachers do not have to be merely ‘consumers’ (Kenway *et al*., 1994) of neoliberal policy and it is hoped that the findings of this project allow for some questioning of the ‘truths’ and knowledge that underpin current practice. If we don’t take up this challenge then we are accepting that the best possible outcomes for children involve shaping them into ‘school ready’ moulds. Some teachers’ responses (as below) to children’s perfect classroom

drawings would certainly suggest that professional and critical conversations are a worthwhile endeavour:

"Why do we think children should be any different to adults. We don't apply the same rules to adults. We don't give children that down time. Sometimes we're off task, yet we expect children to be on task all the time. If they get upset we just expect them to get on with it. It's that time to talk. We don't give children enough time to talk."

Importantly however, it was some of the teachers' more constrained responses that prompted the need to engage young children as a starting point for Study Two, rather than attempting to adapt existing methods or meet pre-conceived outcomes.

As part these professional conversations, teachers might also take the time to privilege the perceptions of children who are marginalised in schools, such as those who are perceived as powerless and 'unready' for Year One. While many teachers inadvertently impose these subject positions through 'teaching-as-usual' practices (Davies, 2006, Davies and Hunt, 1994), these conditions do not wholly determine who children are. Indeed, if we learn to see 'unreadiness' as a category that is 'made up' (Graue and Walsh, 1998, p. xiv) and imposed upon children (Davies, 2006), then we might also see the ways that children can subvert the relations of power in which this category is used. As an example, I came to see the creator of the Cars Classroom (a supposedly unready child) as a 'vector of affect' (Hickey-Moody, 2013) because they

offered something of a departure from what is typical or developmental, they became something different to the category of 'other' imposed upon them. This is not to say I did not experience a great deal of uneasiness when the scribbles and silence of The Cars Classroom ensued, regarding them initially as threats to my orderly, 'rigorous' research. However, this uneasiness was exactly why the classroom was deserving of my attention and my analysis within this thesis.

My change in perception of The Cars Classroom is indicative of my time spent in a position other than teacher, questioning the 'value-neutral knowledge' (Linklater, 2006) that shapes our work in schools, and 'plugging into theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). Thinking with post-structuralist and post-humanist theories allowed me to embrace unexpected occurrences, the notion of becoming, and children's intra-activity with materials, thereby destabilising narrow perspectives of 'school readiness'. A classroom full of Shopkins was an unexpected occurrence, as was a classroom with a dancing pineapple. They are not typically found in an early years classroom. They provide a point of departure. They give us something else to talk about. Thus, we need to allow children's ideas, the things they say (or don't say), and the things they do (or do not do), to become a part of our professional conversations. Perhaps it would also help to work with an understanding of children, as Deleuze did, which emphasises their internal pulse (Knight, 2013), and the spontaneous and contingent nature of their actions:

"Because the body is in constant movement in an environment that is itself always in motion, the potential for variation is almost infinite. The body is always

indeterminate, in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own potential to vary; this is what Deleuze and Guattari name as "emergence"… (Leander and Boldt, 2013, p. 29 - 30)

When we see children in this way, as *"open to becoming and becoming different again"* (Leander and Boldt, 2013) we might be more likely to expand our narrow measured gaze and to accept that we can never fully capture what children are capable of in our classrooms.

Thinking of children as spontaneous and as driven by an internal pulse has meant embracing indeterminacy as a part of my research journey. I was first made aware of the notion of indeterminacy through my engagement with post-structuralist research. This is because indeterminacy is often used to stress a commitment to the indefinite nature of truth and the constructed nature of knowledge. Indeterminacy encouraged me to be more playful in my methodological approach, designing emergent research spaces that would allow the children's ideas to emerge without coercion. The notion of indeterminacy also instilled me with a sense of conviction to value the personal meanings I brought to the children's ideas, and to include the meanings of others (e.g. teachers and researcher supervisors), who brought their own significances to the children's ideas. There is, at the same time, a need to augment these meanings with a principle of uncertainty, and to accept that areas of indeterminacy remain. I would suggest that some of the most significant of these openings and gaps relate to the practice of education and the (im)possibility of embracing indeterminacy within this system:

“Can the teacher make space for fluidity and indeterminacy as the nature of things? Can he or she recognize difference, surprise, and unfolding that follow along paths that are not rational or linear or obviously critical or political?” (Leander and Boldt, 2013, p.44)

The indeterminate nature of Ideas Club does not necessarily constitute a pedagogy for education, but the children’s ideas that emerged there can perhaps help us to imagine the possibilities of providing such a space.

Slowing Down

“Teaching is a complex and theoretically demanding and challenging task. Each teacher assembles for herself a complex array of practices, ideas and theories that are then assembled into meaningful classroom practices.” (Honan, 2004, p. 109)

Policy documents such as the EYFS (DfE, 2017) construct teachers as ‘policy-users’ who compliantly follow instructions (Honan, 2004). Teachers also say they have little room for movement within the institutions of schools (Davies, 2006). However, these understandings belie the complexity of what teachers actually do, which for Honan (2004) involves them following their own ‘lines of flight’ through policy texts so they make their own particular, (im)plausible readings of them. In Honan’s (2004) study, classroom teachers valued children’s opinions even when they expressed them in inappropriate ways

(such as using swear words). Teachers also tried to 'interweave' and connect different discourses about the teaching of literacy into their practice (Honan, 2004). For Honan (2004) these small acts demonstrated teachers' abilities to develop their own 'bricolage' of meaningful classroom practices. This view suggests that Reception teachers might already be activating small, subtle acts of resistance against 'school readiness' policy, a way of working that could be understood using a 'micropolitical' stance:

"Micropolitics are about the beliefs of both society (macro) and the individual (micro) and how these flows of desire produce difference (…) A micropolitics considers the small, everyday encounters as significant to the processes of change (…) (Blaise, 2013, p. 189)

So if a classroom is understood as a place where micropolitics occurs, then what might this look like or feel like for a Reception or Year One teacher? The findings of this project suggest that micropolitics might occur most positively and complexly somewhere between the tick and the tock, in a teacher's deliberate attempt to 'transcend ticking clock time' (Bates, 2019), and to weave, like Liesel (Greig and Lindsay, 2018), acts of care and kindness into classroom life. I offer the idea of slowing down as a response to my own positive experiences of taking a slower methodological approach during Study Two, and as support for the view that there is a pressing need to develop more complex understandings of time:

"*If there is, therefore, an 'urgent' need for change in education, then it is about a shift from instrumentalist practice which sees children as 'means' to the ends predetermined by adults to educational practice which is more sensitive to children's needs and capabilities 'here and now."* (Bates, 2019, p. 424)

The idea of slowing down could also be read as a response to concerns that the EYFS (2017) might be detracting teacher's attention from what is taking place in the everyday lives of children (Dahlberg *et al*., 2013, p. 39). Tellingly, when I did slow down to work with children in more open-ended, material ways during Study Two, I was able to be more attentive to the 'everydayness' of children's lives, and to the 'affective capacities' (Aitken, 2014) of their intelligent ideas. I also came to identify ways in which the children themselves appeared to slow down time, such as by exchanging secret notes and drawing classrooms full of Shopkins. Indeed, it would seem that both children and adults have the power to 'take hold of time' and to construct the way time is used (Bloome, 2009), but perhaps there are ways in which children and adults can do this together.

For Bates (2019) the act of slowing down time could be referred to as 'pedagogical slow time'; time with no pre-specified objectives or goals where children are allowed to dwell longer in the moment, to engage in free, imaginative play, and to experience time as a more intense duration. However, this type of practice appears a more challenging ambition in Year One where time is more likely to be encountered as separate 'building blocks' (Bates, 2019) of lessons and learning, compared to in a Reception classroom. 'Pedagogical

slow time' for older children might therefore look different. It might be free drawing. It might be time with clay. It might be extended periods of time to draft and develop ideas (Kuby *et al*., 2015). And it might also be about trust, because ultimately this small, subtle change in practice is also about trusting children as learners, trusting that with their own time and space children will find their own valuable and purposeful ways of making sense of the world (Kuby *et al*., 2015). As a researcher working in slower, more open-ended ways, I also had to put my trust in children. I had to suppose that whatever they said and did would help me on my journey to thinking differently about 'school readiness'. Relinquishing control and becoming more vulnerable was not an easy feat, but then I'd like to think that this is a strength of my research, that it does not offer easy, straightforward ways of working with children. I have also come to understand that time is a hugely ethical matter, and that our responsibility for enhancing children's educational opportunities is not located in 'accountability' systems, but in everyday choices made by adults who work with children (Bates, 2019). Perhaps the rather aptly placed tortoise seen in one perfect classroom drawing further underlines my point, that the logics of speed and urgency (logics which underpin 'school readiness' policy) do not necessarily win the race, nor do they offer an ethical way of working with children.

"A hare and a tortoise were having an argument. The hare who could run very fast, thought he was much cleverer than the tortoise who could only move slowly and had to carry his house around on his back."

Image 29. From Brian Wildsmith's (2007) version of 'The Hare and the Tortoise'

'Things' Matter

"Things, just as humans, make things happen. Things, just as humans, offer certain possibilities and foreclose others" (Hultman, 2010, p. 7).

The children's perfect classrooms in Study One were filled with objects – pencils, chairs, Shopkins, a clock and a snowman, to name but a few. Perhaps this is not surprising given that Western classrooms are full of objects too, particularly early years classrooms, where there are a range of 'learning objects' to be found:

"Learning objects are physical objects, specifically designed to promote learning through hands-on interaction. They are popular materials in early childhood education, at school and at home." (Zuckerman, 2006, accessed online)

Image 30. Classroom objects as seen in illustrations from 'Starting School' by Janet and Allan Ahlberg (2013)

Based on this definition we could therefore say that many classroom objects are implicated in the 'readiness for school' agenda on account of their perceived ability to promote children's learning and development. It is also telling that not all objects are welcome in classroom spaces, particularly objects from home. These objects often arouse such suspicion that they get arrested at the classroom door (Jones *et al*., 2015). But what if these objects matter more than we think? What if they can help children manage the trauma of separation, or bring them in from the margins of their classroom (Jones *et al*., 2012)? What if they give children a chance to experience time in a slower, more intense way (Kuby *et al*., 2015), or offer an outlet for showing they care (Hodgins, 2014)? What if they can also make our work with children more ethical? The findings of this research project offer support for such views, in the sense that Shopkins, clay and other 'things' really did *matter.* Such objects also appeared to prompt children to care and to be intelligent in ways that are not necessarily acknowledged by 'readiness discourse'. With these findings in mind, I was left wondering how often have these children, (those I worked with during this

project) been given the chance to learn with, to 'intra-act' with, and care for 'things' since their move to Year One?

'Intra-action' (used above) is a term borrowed from Barad (2007) who wanted to highlight the productive aspects of the relation between human and nonhuman things as a contrast to the usual understanding of interaction, which assumes separateness and individual agency of physical matter (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). This framework (and ideas derived pluralistically from fields such as New Materialism and Post-humanism) helped me to ask different questions of children's ideas such as: how do Shopkins work? What sorts of shifts in knowledge and practice can clay bring? And while objects and materials might already 'mingle' (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012) in the everyday practices of Reception children, this framework could also prompt teachers to appreciate how significant the materials and objects are in their classroom, and what the implications might be for children in Year One classrooms, when tables, chairs and pencils take centre stage, and where possibilities for 'things making things happen' (Hultman, 2010) appear to close down:

"The consequence of this process of thought is that no situation can be observed without also seeing it in relation to the materials – which play a role in "everything". It is not insignificant which space, materials and environments children are offered, nor are the discourses that inform this practice unimportant." (Odegard, 2012, p. 392)

Perhaps older children aren't allowed to use as many objects because policy-makers don't fully understand what children actually do with them, and so, rather than embrace this uncertainty, they close it down, by taking away lively objects and adding more tables and chairs. Thus, pedagogues that concentrate more so on materials, and less on children's development towards normative goals, could be conceived as a resistance to these attempts to simplify children's educational experiences. For the teacher in Kuby and colleagues (2015) study this type of practice involved offering 7- and 8-year-old children the chance to work for extended periods with materials during a writing workshop. By working in less prescriptive ways, children were able to enact multiple ways of communicating and to understand writing as more than just alphabetic print (Kuby *et al*., 2015). For these children, writing also became about story-making and sharing new ideas (Kuby *et al*., 2015), a way of working that parallels with the emergence of clay stories, as seen in Chapter 5. Perhaps the introduction of an after-school 'Ideas Club' could give older children the time and space to play and learn with materials on more complex terms, and to produce the kind of new ideas that emerged during Study Two of this project. Introducing this type of club in Year One might also help soften the abrupt change in pedagogy children experience as they move out their playful early years environments.

Summarising Thoughts

Alternative Discourses of 'Readiness'

‘School readiness’ in England reduces and measures early years Reception children against normative ‘Early Learning Goals’ (DfE, 2017) to assess whether or not they are ready for Year 1. Reception children also need to be primary school ‘test-ready’ since the introduction of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Test in 2012 (Robert-Holmes, 2019). Goals and tests such as these are steering teachers in untoward directions such as to group children by ability to ensure the rapid acquisition of skills (Robert-Holmes, 2019). Furthermore, the focus on children’s ‘unreadiness’ (Tickell, 2011) appears to be overshadowing the way we see children who are not meeting ‘developmental norms’, resulting in their exclusion from positions of 'success' (Evans, 2015). This makes ‘school readiness’ a particularly emotive and controversial issue. Fortunately, efforts to change the way we think about children and ‘school readiness’ are slowly emerging. The results of O’Farrelly *et al*.’s (2019) ‘Rethinking Readiness’ project, which was grounded in children’s priorities, revealed that children’s motivational attributes and their enjoyment of school should form a part of future ‘readiness’ frameworks. Creating supportive conditions to ensure children feel able and enthusiastic for school appears to me to be an important implication of these findings. Evans’ (2015) rethinking of ‘readiness’ is also pertinent to this project, given her engagement with Deleuzian concepts. Evans (2015) encourages us to think of ‘readiness’ as the creation of open conditions that allow for children to depart from predetermined norms, to pursue new lines of flight, and generate new thinking. This view indicates to me that there is a need to move our attention away from the child and towards their surroundings, the things they intra-act with, the way we intra-act with them, the ways we show we care – the what and how children

‘become’. This is more than just schools adjusting their practice to be ‘ready for children’ because it requires a more complex logic of working with children that enable us to think about “the non-linear elements of children’s learning in creative and productive terms” (Evans, 2015, p. 34). It is interesting that Cullingford (2006) also invokes the notions of ‘conditions’ in his discussion of children and schooling. He reminds us that learning is not the same as being taught, a point which could be translated as further support for creating more open-ended, emergent classroom spaces for ‘becoming’ to happen.

The findings of this project purport similar complex ways of working with children in relation to ‘readiness’ to that described by Evans (2015). We should want children to surprise us with their intelligence and their ideas, we should want them to deviate from norms, but we need to be thinking about what kinds of classroom environments provoke these kinds of becomings. Perhaps we can allow children’s perfect classrooms to help us imagine these spaces. Perhaps the children’s ideas that emerged during Study Two can help us foster more playful, open approaches to working with children, approaches that are not just confined to the early years. I would also like future conversations about ‘readiness’ to feature notions of care because where are caring children valued in frameworks ‘school readiness’? Caring children emerged as an unexpected area of wonder during my analysis in response to children’s caring-ness for things in their perfect classrooms (e.g. tortoises and Shopkins) and in the way they cared for clay. However, it would seem that children need things to care for, which is a somewhat troubling idea given that learning becomes a great deal more formal for children when they move to Year 1. Future research might

further explore ways that children care for things, and how allowing children more opportunities to care might impact positively on their school experiences.

Further Implications for Practice and Future Research

This chapter has indicated ways in which the findings of this research might translate into educational practice, such as to work with children in slower, more material ways. It would appear that this type of approach requires teachers to be more curious and more vulnerable than that which is valued by current policy-making. To truly transform practice, policy-makers might also consider aligning the concept of 'school readiness' more closely with Ranciére's (1991) logic of emancipation. This would mean teacher's working under the assumption of children's intelligence and developing conditions in which children's intelligence might be provoked. Future research might consider what these conditions look like in everyday practice, not just in Reception but in Year One too, which would make for a more challenging research endeavour. It is hoped that future research studies will also experiment with researching with children in slower, more playful ways as inspired by my work with Ideas Club. Such approaches might be read as a more 'valid' attempt (St Pierre, 1997) to respect children's lives and the power-full becoming ways they move through the world. Indeed, children have a power-full defence against the rigid power of intuitional spaces, however they also need powerful allies to help them to do so. It is hoped that such research might help foster further complex and ethical conversations about 'readiness', the likes of which are missing in the current dominant discourse. I will now conclude this chapter with one final research

story, which hopefully emphasises the value of listening to children and their ideas.

A Final Story – Where is the Rainbow?

During one Ideas Club session the children and I ended up in a Year One classroom because there were few other places in the school that day for us to meet. As we were having our usual drink and chat to start the session, a short conversation ensued between one of the children and the Year One teaching assistant who happened to still be in the room. At the time I took little notice of what was being said, it was only later when I listened back to the audio recording that I fully tuned in to their words. The child was asking the teaching assistant about the behaviour chart that was stuck on the wall – a sun, and two clouds, one white and one grey, and the names of all the children in the class stuck to the sun. The children who stay on the sun know how to behave; they help create *"the context that is recognisable as a classroom"* (Davies and Hunt, 1994). However, those who disrupt the order are moved to the clouds:

What are the sun and clouds for?
So no one has been on the white cloud or dark cloud?
Have you not had anyone on the rain cloud?
But what about if you do really good?
In nursery we had a rainbow. If you were on the rainbow you got a certificate.
We did drum rolls when we were at nursery.

Drums rolls, rainbows and certificates; where are the drum rolls and rainbows in Year One? At first glance there appears to be only sunshine and clouds, sunshine for the ones who are ‘ready', and clouds for the children who can’t sit still, who can’t listen, who do not stay inside the lines. Reflecting on the child’s comments, I wondered how many classrooms around the country have similar types of sanction systems, which punish undesirable patterns of behaviour in the hope that they eventually fade away and leave only those that are regarded as conducive to learning (Payne, 2015). I also wondered how far these systems are critically appraised before being put into action, because here was a Reception child asking astute questions about their purpose. *What happens if you do something good? Where do you go?* Responses that point to the powerful presence of such systems (and matter) in the classroom. Tellingly, the Reception children in Linklater’s (2006) study consistently portrayed the teacher as someone who imposed routine, and had the power to punish or reward them, not for skill, but for compliance with rules. Perhaps not surprisingly, the core findings of a study of behavior policies also revealed a complex picture of human responses to rewards, incentives, punishments and teacher relationships (Payne, 2015).

A week later when I returned to the same school for my final Ideas Club session, I shared the child’s words with the Year One teacher whose classroom we had sat in. The teacher was very recently qualified, and a person whom I knew fairly well so I trusted she would want to hear what had been said. At first the teacher was keen to reassure me that she regularly rewarded the children for their successes in the classroom, for their ‘rainbow moments’ - something that I had

not doubted. However, she also admitted that she had never given much thought to the sunshine and clouds stuck to her classroom wall. It was a system she had inherited from the previous occupant of the classroom that she had kept for reasons of continuity. I was really pleased we had had this conversation about the sunshine and clouds, and about the Reception children who I'd got to know through Ideas Club – children who would soon be moving into her class. I shared with her some of the children's intelligent ideas, their wonderful creations and described to her the caring ways in which I'd seen them move through the world. I heard from her the next day. She thanked me for our talk and for giving her this insight. She also told me that the sunshine and the clouds were now gone, a small but ethical act, which showed that children's ideas really do *matte*r:

Then one day, something amazing happened.

My idea changed right before my very eyes.

It spread its wings, took flight, and burst into the sky.

I don't know how to describe it but it went from being here to being everywhere.

It wasn't just part of me anymore… it was part of everything.

And then I realised what you do with an idea. You change the world.

So what will become of your idea? Now that's up to you.

Yamada, 2013

March 2020

At the time of writing this conclusion I did not know, that only weeks later, our country, and many other parts of the world, would be brought to a near standstill by the outbreak of a virus. The shops on our local high street are temporarily closed, our street is strangely quiet, and my daughter is no longer in school. Yet the way in which time is standing still right now feels eerily similar to way time was paused in Greig and Lindsay's (2018) picture book - the clock was pulled to a stop, to slow the city down, to make people notice things they hadn't before. And while this virus marks a sad and troubling time for our country, there appears an opportunity for us to also stop and think, to look out for others, and to notice what kind of education we want for our children. I do not want my daughter to spend the coming days and weeks at home completing copious amounts of online work. Instead I want her to slow down, to put those SATs pressures into perspective, to have new ideas, and to notice the everyday things that matter to her. When Liesel (Greig and Lindsay, 2018) un-paused the clock the city had somehow become kinder, and I hope when this is all over that we are kinder too, and perhaps a little more willing to acknowledge that life does not run in smooth, straight lines after all:

"If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities. But one thing is sure: if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we're going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways." (Law, 2004, p. 2)

The Reception children's ideas in this project have helped me envisage a world beyond 'school readiness', a world in which we do not claim to know what Reception children are capable of. In this world there would be opportunities for children of all ages to slow down, to play and to care for things, and there would be adults more willing to trust in children's preferred ways of learning. There would also be more objects and materials, things for children to connect with and making meaning from, and objects from home (such as Shopkins) would be a welcome part of this process. There might even be flowers and tortoises should we really want to let our imagination run wild. To Dr Xargle (Willis, 1988) a classroom like this might still appear strange, however it would hopefully be a more inclusive and diverse space should his class of aliens ever decide to visit.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

The Pilot School

A school metaphorically holds up a mirror in which an image is reflected. There may be several images, positive and negative (Bernstein, 2000, pp.xxi).

In Chapter 1, I gave a brief overview of the four school settings that were involved in this research project. Within this introduction I indicated my close association with one particular school (aliased 'Northbank'), where I worked full time as a teacher (2009-2015) and continued to work, throughout my PhD, as a supply teacher (September 2015-present). It was at this school that I carried out an early trialling of methods as part of a pilot study. Northbank School was also used as a research site throughout the rest of Study One and during Study Two, so it stands as an important part of this research story. The kind of account I offer of Northbank is not presented in the detached, objective manner I have become accustomed to reading within other research literature. In its place I would like to offer the reader personal descriptions of the school, the latter of which traces some of my own 'insider' story at Northbank. By writing in this way, I acknowledge that my perceptions of Northbank (both past and present) will have had implications for the way I came to work with the data. Within this section I also interweave the perceptions of other people, such as parents, who are directly related to the school. I have done this to create a more rounded sense of Northbank, than that might be offered by my opinion alone. I hope that these accounts will also remind the reader that schools are a great deal more than just bricks and

mortars, and facts and figures – I believe they are viewed in particular ways by particular people, depending on their own personal stories and values.

'Northbank' is located in my hometown on the North East coast of England, so I knew of the school long before I came to work there. It is the school that my parents referred to as '*the one in the posh estate'* when I was growing up, given it's proximity to a prestigious residential area full of 1980s detached housing, most of which now sells for upwards of £400,000 (the 2015 'Index of Multiple Deprivation' also placed the school's ward in the top 10% of least deprived in the country). In view of its esteemed location, Northbank First School is known around the area for its 'favourable' catchment of families and excellent school results. I know of parents who have gone to great lengths to secure a place for their child at the school, and I have heard teachers, working in other areas, postulate about how easy it must be to work in a school with such well-behaved children – '*you can actually teach!'* Indeed, there is an assumption that Northbank School is a pretty 'picture-perfect' place to be, where high performing children are taught in classes, free of trouble and strife. From my own experiences at the school, I believe that these auspicious views of Northbank do bear some truth. In general, the children who attend the school enjoy safe and stable upbringings, in the company of adults who hold their children's education in high regard. This translates, on the whole, into a positive, affable school and community backdrop. However, in response to others' broad-brush assumptions, I would also argue that every school setting has its own pressures and complexities – even Northbank. I think some of these complexities are nuanced in the

following four descriptions of the school, three of which are offered by parents associated with Northbank. Evan and Davies, (2004) remind us that parents' and guardians' views of a school will be positioned differently to teachers and other parents by virtue of their own values, thus highlighting the worth of including these descriptions, alongside my own interpretations.

'Eloise'

The following account of Northbank is offered by an 'ex-parent' of the school – 'Eloise'. Her child, 'Hannah', went to Northbank for 2 years, attending Nursery and Reception, before moving to another part of the country due to changes in her father's employment. Hannah is now in Key Stage 1.

"Northbank school is fundamentally a good school and we were very lucky that Hannah was able to spend the first two years of her schooling with such caring and enthusiastic teachers who gave her the confidence and knowledge that has helped her since. However, it was apparent at the time and even more so now (having had the opportunity to see a different school's approach) that the teaching staff were constrained massively by the way in which the children were assessed, and by the numbers in the class. It is impossible to be spontaneous or creative when there is so much paperwork to do for 30 children. A more liberal approach and extra assistant help (or smaller classes!) would go a long way in the school to make the learning more fun and appealing to each child."

Interestingly, Eloise presents an account of Northbank that is in contrast to her daughter's current school – a setting which appears to offer it's pupils a more 'liberal' approach, in part because of its smaller class sizes. There is the suggestion that arduous assessment procedures at Northbank, place greater demands on its teaching staff and on their ability to be creative. Eloise describes these issues as if they are specific to Northbank, rather than a reflection of the education system, or schools in general. Eloise's positive comments about Northbank relate to Hannah's 'caring and enthusiastic teachers', which might be reflective of the wider ethos of the school and of Eloise's priorities for Hannah's education. Eloise's other priorities for Hannah appear to include having fun, opportunities for creativity, and above all, Hannah's happiness. Within this account, Eloise also presents us with the idea that learning should be appealing to 'each' child. In my experience, these kinds of expectations are common to Northbank's wider parental community.

Lyndsey

'Lyndsey' has two children 'Jack' (12) and 'Luke' (8) who have both attended Northbank. Jack, now in middle school, was on the school's special educational needs register with a diagnosis of autism. Luke is currently in Year 4 at Northbank and starts middle school in September.

"Northbank is a well organised and family orientated school, which takes pride in the achievements gained by each individual child. Both my children have been extremely happy at Northbank and have been well supported by all the teachers through their first school years. My older son has additional needs

and the schools provision was excellent in supporting him both academically and in building social friendships. The children are encouraged to be independent and gain confidence in reaching their potential in an extremely positive way."

I would suggest that Lyndsey's description of Northbank is markedly more positive compared to Eloise, and Lyndsey's values appear to be more strongly allied with the school's ethos. It is interesting that some of the expressions Lyndsey uses mirrors language found on the school website. She clearly holds the school in high regard. I have heard other parents speak about Northbank in a similarly appreciative way, as shown in the next description.

Emily

'Emily' has three children, two of which still attend the school. As well as being a parent, Emily has worked with children at Northbank and in other North Tyneside schools, in her previous job offering educational outreach workshops.

"Northbank is a successful school and children who attend are gaining one of the best starts. Children academically do very well and leave at a high standard. The school itself feels warm and inviting; I feel comfortable attending, and my children have all been very happy there. Perhaps not as 'cutting edge' as other schools in the area, it is what I would term 'traditional' in approach. The children are polite, respectful and happy...it is a solid start."

Emily's words echo some of those already used by Lyndsey and Eloise. She appears very grateful for the 'solid start' the school has given her children and how happy they have been there. It is interesting that she considers the school to be 'traditional', rather than 'cutting edge' and this appears to be a reflection of her experiences working in other North Tyneside schools.

Rachel

Rachel, who works as an Early Years advisor for the local authority, offers a final 'other person' account of the school. She is familiar with Northbank as a result of her role.

"The one thing that won't change any time soon is Northbank's catchment. That's what makes it different to others in the borough. The school's catchment presents a different set of challenges. Most of the children come fully loaded with a wealth of experiences and with comparatively higher order skills. Their perception of the world and of adults is very different. This somehow makes the children appear more visible than in other schools."

Given Rachel's involvement with many schools across the local authority it is interesting that her account of Northbank mainly relates to the 'kind' of children who attend the school. Within her interpretation there is reference to the children's upbringings and the different demands this places on teachers. From my own involvement, these demands mainly relate to promoting children's 'better than expected' progress across the more 'academic' subjects to build on the children's starting points. Rachel's comments about

the children's visibility and their understanding of the world are thought provoking and perhaps infer some of the more profound outcomes of a affluent upbringing. The phrase 'fully loaded' also stands in contrast to the 'empty vessel' image of the child, commonly used to illustrate particular educational approaches.

I hope that the four interpretations offered above help build a picture of the Northbank context. Of course, these are only four accounts of numerous I could have sourced, and each person's motivation for writing as they have cannot be fully understood. It was also my choice to seek out these particular people's interpretations because of their unique viewpoints, and therefore I know I am accountable for shaping a particular picture of the school. I wanted this picture to reflect some of my own lived experiences and to suggest something about the kind of environment and people I worked with. Broadly speaking, Northbank is viewed as a school that effectively educates an affluent catchment of high achieving pupils. While many people speak about this repute in positive terms, others appear to recognise the challenges and limitations of this specific school context. Personally, I can relate to both the gratification and the complications captured in the foregoing accounts and as such, they provide a useful framework for considering my own conceptions of the school.

My story at Northbank began when I was 15 years old, during a weeklong work experience placement in the year 2000. I can remember the building quite vividly as it was then, in its much smaller form, and the array of 'jobs' I

was given to keep me busy - duties which included tidying the classroom cupboards and washing out the teachers cups in the staffroom. As fate would have it, I went on to occupy this same classroom ten years later, as a Year Three teacher at the school. Interestingly, in the time that elapsed between my placement and later employment, I got a sense that not a lot had changed – there were similar groups of children, many of the same staff, and I even recognised one of the displays. I remember wondering if all schools 'moved' along in their same distinguishable ways, as I had perceived on my return to Northbank. This 'sameness' generated early feelings of unease about where I might 'fit', in this undulating school story, as a young and recently qualified teacher. This was an uneasiness that never really left me, despite the many happy times I had at the school.

Looking back to the parents' accounts of Northbank, I can appreciate why the school's ambition for its pupils is viewed in such a positive light. In general, the children are seen as knowledgeable, intelligent and highly capable individuals. And when coupled with the school's culture of success, the children achieve and experience many wonderful things. Certainly, it was working with Northbank pupils that shaped my view of children as highly perceptive and imaginative individuals, and it was lovely to work in a place where learning felt limitless. Coming into this project, these experiences led me to form the assumption that all children carry this wonderful potential and as such, it was likely that I would look for evidence of this in the data I collected, as a challenge to narrow fixed conceptions of readiness.

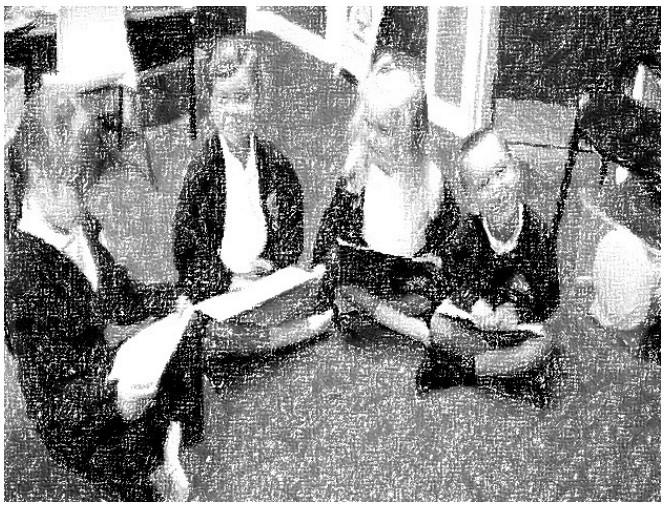
My countless interactions with Northbank children have definitely remained in my mind's eye throughout this research project and there are particular children, from my past and present, who stand out as having influenced this journey. One of these children is 'Tim', who I taught during my first year in Reception. I knew then, that the early learning goals could not capture his wide-ranging capabilities and his unique outlook on life. I often wonder what 'readiness' meant for him.

It was my first day teaching in Reception at Northbank and I was reading the class a story. It was a 'lift-the-flap' kind of story so I was encouraging the children to guess what was hiding on every page.

Miss Heads: What do you think might be cooking in the oven?
Sid: A cake?
Finn: A pie?
Georgina: A pizza?
Tim: A baked Alaska…!

The rest of the class were very curious about what a baked Alaska was, so I quickly set about finding a picture of the dessert to show on the whiteboard, while Tim got up to the front of the class to explain what it was. Funnily enough, it was not a baked alaska that was hiding behind the flap of that book that day but something much less remarkable.

Oddly, it is only since leaving the school that I finally feel a sense of belonging there. This is perhaps because I have had time to reflect more positively on the way my experiences there, have come to shape my story. I'm sure it is also because I really miss the people there, especially the children and that is why I am grateful to still be able to teach there from time to time, and to have had the opportunity to use the school as a research site.

DCPS	 The Perfect Classroom				
Time	**LH**	**Child 1**	**Child 2**	**Child 3**	**Child 4**
00:05	*Izzie what have you got in front of you today?* *What is it?* *A piece of paper and a whiteboard. Double check, has that piece of paper got anything on?* *It has not. Boys and girls you see this piece of paper –*	*No!*	*Em* *A piece of paper and a whiteboard.* *Nooo!*		*Nooooo!* *It's normal paper.*
00:24	*It is. It's complete empty. And you know this piece of paper Jack –* *It is plain, that's a super word to use.* *This – what were you going to ask Lola?* *You think we have to use our*	Lola raises her hand indicating she wants to speak. *We have to use our imagination to draw sumthink on here.*	*It's plain.*		

	imagination to draw something on here? Well Lola you're kind of right. Can you switch your thinking caps on for me? Gestures towards head, as if turning button on.	Copies gesture	Copies gesture and grins.	Copies gesture	
00:45	*Jack, what I'd like you think about, is today this blank piece of paper, is not a piece of paper, it's actually an empty room. I'm just going to put it here.* Places paper down in front of the children.				
	You see this empty room has got nothing in it. Shall I tell you what kind of room it is? It is an empty classroom.	Nods head.	*Yeah.*		
		Pulls funny face.	Smiles and looks over at Lola.		
	An empty classroom with nothing in it. Guess what I'd like you to do?				
				Ella raises her hand to speak.	
	Ella?				
	Oh! Ella you're absolutely right.	Lola raises her hand to speak.		*Draw things in it!*	
	Go on Lola?		*And use your imagination.*		
01:22		*And use your imagination.*			Jack has his hand in the air. *And, and if you don't have toys in classroom-s, you will be bored.*
	If you don't have toys in classrooms you will be bored. That's interesting.				
	Boys and girls, you know what the classroom that you draw…	Nods head.		Nods head.	
	It's going to be your very own perfect classroom. What you think the best classroom in the world might look like.	Lola raises hand to speak.			

	So I'm going to give you a pencil, ok, aand, you can draw your perfect classroom.				
	What gorgeous manners boys and girls.			*Thank you!*	
			Thaaaank you!		*Thank you very much!*
02:01	*You can begin planning what you think your perfect classroom would look like.* *Yes Lola?*				
		I'm going to draw some Shopkins in my mine.			
	Off you go! Get drawing.				*WHAT!*
		Do you know…		Says something inaudible, but clearly has an ideas and begins drawing.	
		They actually do jumbo Shopkins you know.	*I'm going to draw some toys and some people.*		
		They do jumbo Shopkins cos' some of the playsets, the main playsets (?).			*That's the big classroom.*
				Joooee. You can't do that	
	He's allowed to. *This is yourrr idea. There's no right answer, there's no wrong answer.*			*Jack's doing that!* Points at Jack's sheet.	*This is a big..classroom.*
02:41		*I'm going to write my name on the top.*			
	That's fine.				*Big classroom!*
	It's going to be a big classroom Jack?				Laughs
			I know how to spell my name. It's I, ss, ll, a.		
	It is, good girl. *Ok Lola, what's the first thing you're going to put in your perfect classroom?*				
		A chalkboard. Laughs.			
	Oo, go on then.				

		I am going to put in Shopkins.			*What about Shopkins?!* Laughs *Aaah!* Laughs
	Jack what are you going to put in your classroom?	*I have Shopkins at my house.* Raises hand, wanting to speak.			*BATMAN TOYS!*
03:10	*Show me what those look like, Jack.*		*I've got lots of Shopkins at my house.*		
	Have you (to Izzie). Yes, Lola?	*Am in the hundreds with my Shopkins.*			*This!* Speaks to Izzie…*I've got the whole squad (?) in my house…and a car (?).* Difficult to make out.
	What are Shopkins then, I don't understand?	*They're things whi, they're things in categories, that have faces.*			
	Are they characters? Do you hold them? Are they like dolls?	*Yeah, but they're smaller than Barbie dolls.*			
	Ok, they're smaller than Barbie Dolls –	*Only that small* Makes gesture with fingers to show how small.			
	And do you collect them?	*Yeah.* Nods head. My dad collects rock food.			
	Does he?	*Yeah he collects the sticks of rock.*			
03:43				*You can get an APP of it.*	
	Can you?			Nods head.	
	On your iPad?			Nods head.	

	Gestures to Lola. *Can you show me what they look like in your classroom?*				
03:50	*Izzie, what have you got in your classroom so far?* *So in your perfect classroom Izzie, would there be a whiteboard?* *Why do you want their to be a whiteboard in your perfect classroom?* Shrugs shoulders. *Good plan.*	*Cus, there is in our classrooms (?)*	*That, that's going to be the teacher, and I'm drawing, I'm going to draw the whiteboard.* *Yeah.* Goes to speak but is interrupted by Lola. *Because there has to be a whiteboard for teachers to write the date on and the days.*		*BATMAN!* Gestures for me to look at his drawing.
04:19 04:27	*So who are these Jack?* *Can you remember what you've drawn in your perfect classroom?* *Why have you put your batman toys in your classroom?*				*Errr.* Silent for quite some time as he looks at his drawing. *Em…em… Batman toys.* *'Cos people might wanna play Batman.*

	That's a lovely idea Jack. Would you like to play Batman?				Nods head.
04:47

	Batman toys. What else would you like in your classroom Jack? *Remember you can choose!* *Go for it!* *Have a brave go Jack, have a brave go.* *To Lola – so you've got your chalk board annnd…* *A door. What are you going to put next?* *What are you going to put next?* 05:58 *Aaah you've got the same.* *Aaaah is it.* 06:01 *You're going to do a book Jack?* *What have you done Ella?* *You've drawn yourself in your classroom?* *Ok.*	*Look at that tiny door!* Holds drawing up and laughs. *A door!* Laughs. *It looks like a mouse door!* Laughs again. To Izzie - *Are you going to do cheeky cherries? You need to do a real cherries, in real life (?).* Lola responds to Izzie's Shopkins comment - it's hard to make out the exact response. *Do you know, I'm actually going to draw little Sipper.*	Hold up drawing to and points - *This is a little shopkin.* *It's a cherry shopkin (?)*	*I've done myself.* *I've done myself.* Points to drawing. *Myself.* Nods head.	*Emm.. cars!* Laughs *I don't know how to do cars!* Jack is looking at the wall. *I'm gunna do a book!* *Cos' look on there.* Jack points to the wall.

	Ok.	*She's a little drink.* Laughs. *She's cute.*		*I'm just going to do register.*	
06:33	*That's fine.* *Jack, why would you like a book in your classroom?* *Ok. Would you read the book Jack?* *Would you?* *Why would you read the book Jack?* *To do your homework?.. So in Jack's classroom he's got - Batman toys and…* *And a book.What are you going to do next? You're doing such good thinking Jack.*	Lola responds to Izzie with more Shopkins talk but it's hard to make out what she is saying.	*Now I'm going to an apple.* *Apple Shopkins! Apple Shopkins!* Points to drawing and shows Lola. Grins as she does so.		*And a book!* Holds up drawing to show me. Laughs as he does so. *For people to read.* Nods head. *Yeah.* *To do my homework.* At the same time as me – *Batman toys.* *A book.* *Erm*
07:07	*Aaaah. (To Ella)*		*I'm gunna do some whiteboard pens and rubber.* *I'm going to do some whiteboards and rubber so the children can play teachers.*	*I'm gunna do a board, a normal board.*	*Emmm.* *Wormy! Wormy! Wormy!* Points to a worm on the wall. *Wormy! Wormy! Wormy!*
07:20	*You want the boys and girls to be able to play teachers?*		*Yeah, the can if they want to.*		

	Ah, why do you want to be able to play teachers? *Well I know but what's Izzie's answer? Izzie, why would you like to be able to play teachers?* *Ok!*	*Cos' then they can act like a real teachers.*	*Cos'* – gets cut off by Lola. *Becus, cus it's, cus some, they think it's a good idea.*		
07:39

08:30	*Aaaaah. And who is Kieran?* *Is he?* *Yes Lola?* *Aaaah. So at the minute Lola, who, what have you got in your classroom?* *Fantastic.* *Aha! Ok!*	Lola starts tapping my knee. *That is, that is, em, Berry Smoothie.* *Em, chalkboard and a door and Shopkins.* Laughs. *I'm still drawing ma Shopkins.* Laughs. *Cos I like Shopkins. Shopkins are my favourite.*	*Shopkins are my favourite.* Pulls a face.	To Jack - *Yes*	*Kieran is watching Batman.* *Kieran, with the same hair as me.* *Does everyone know Kieran?* Laughs. *Kieran.. Kieran… Kieran.*
08:56	*Who are you doing?* *A baby? A real baby?* *Now why is there a baby in your classroom?* *You don't know.*			*I'm gunna do baby in the classroom!* Laughs. *A baby!* Nods head. *I don't know.* Shakes head. *Laughs.*	*Laughs in response to Ella.* *Kierannnnn! Points to drawing.*

09:10

10:03	*OK, now remember, you've only got two more things you can draw in your classroom Lola, so think carefully.. what last two things do you want in your classroom?* *What have you got Jack?* *Well done! One more thing Jack, can you think?* *Something that Jack* – taps Jack's head – *would love in his classroom.* 10:29 *She has. Well you have got rather curly hair.* *Girls, can you add, see if you can add a couple more things, two more things.* *And a desk for the teacher.* Holds up picture prompt. *Lola, who would be in your classroom?* 10:43	*I love Shopkins so I'm guna do 100 Shopkins.* Starts drawing again. *Theres er, there's a desk for the teacher.* Holds up drawing to show me. *Shopkins!* Points to drawing and laughs.	*This is you Ella.* Holds up drawing to show Ella. Izzie laughs at Ella's comment. Izzie grins.	Ella looks at Izzie's drawing. *I don't have that much curly (?)* Ella doesn't seem happy with the way Izzie has done her hair. Ella then smiles too. *She done loads of curly hair on my face.* Points to Izzie's drawing. Smiles.	*A football!* Waves drawing in air. *A football!* Waves drawing in air again. Looks towards wall. Still looking up towards the wall. Jack stands up and moves out of shot. He looks as if he is getting closer to the wall. *A eggy!*

	Would there be any people? Looks round to see what Jack is doing. *Is there any other people in your classroom?* *So there's no, there's no people in your classroom?* *It's a Shopkins classroom.* *It's a Shopkins school?* *Can I ask? If you wanted to create your own Shopkins school, why do you like Shopkins so much?* *A-ha.* *You're going to draw some Disney figures! Izzie why are you going to*	*It's going to be a Shopkins classroom! That's why it's got a (?) door.* *There's just all kinds of Shopkins.* *No cos it's a Shopkins classroom!* *It's a Shopkins school!* Nods head. *A Shopkins school.* *'Becus there so cute, and they're only that small.* Uses fingers to gesture size. But, by the way - laughs - she has not got that long straws. Points to drawing. *I'm going to draw a berry on a.*	*Em, I'm going, I'm going to draw some, Disney figures.*		*A eggy!* *It's a eggy!* Jack sits back down on the carpet.
11:12					

	draw some Disney figures? *Absolutely. Go for it.*		*Cus I like Disney.*		
11:43	*Jack are you nearly finished?!* *Jack would you like to tell me about your classroom? Come and sit round here.* *Yes.* *Ok, what's the egg for?* *Can I ask you -* *Eating in the dinner hall! Can I ask you, look at this sign, Jack, where is this classroom? Where would Jack like to put this classroom?* *In your own classroom? Where is that Jack? What is your classroom?* *What's your classroom called?* *The ladybirds. So you'd like your classroom to be in the ladybirds classroom.* *Thank you Jack.*	*Ladybirds.*		*For the lunch!* Speaks on Jack's behalf. *Who's Sadie Soccerball?*	Nods head. *Eh..Some batman toys and Kieran and a book and a worm and a football and a, a egg.* Laughs *Eating!* *Eating in the dinner hall!* Points in the direction of his classroom. *In ma own classroom.* *Through there.* Points again. *Ladybirds.* Nods head.
12:40	*You can go.* *I don't need anybody else but thank you for asking, thanks Jack.*	*Am, I'm doing Sadie Soccerball.*			Can I go? *Who shall I get for you?* Jack leaves room.

12:56	*Ah Izzie, come and sit round here so you can tell me a little bit more about it.* *Right then, tell me – thank you Lola! You're loving those Shopkins! What have you got n your perfect classroom Izzie?*	*This is Sadie Soccerball… she's from Season 5… That one, she is, these two are from Season One and that's from Season Four.* *These two are just friends Season Two, Season One and thee, and that one is friends Season Four and that one is friends Season Five!* Laughs *Cos I have them at my house.*	*I'm finished!*		
13:21	*Fantastic. Who are the people in your classroom?* *Can I ask, what will the teacher be doing in your classroom? What does the teacher do?* *Does work with other children. Can I ask you, like Jack, where is this classroom?* *If you could put it anywhere, where would you put it Izzie?*		*I've got people and two Shopkins and I've got one em Disney figure and I've got some whiteboards.* *Ella, the teacher and some like Kieran and Jack and me.* *Work.. with other children.* *Em.*		

14:22	*Down your street? Why would you put it in your street?* *Ah. It would be super quick to get to school?* Laughs *Wow Izzie thank you very much.* *If you would like to you can.*	*This is not -* *This is NOT a snail.* Gestures at drawing. *This is Whitney*	*Just near my, just down my street.* *Because, because that would be a little bit quicker.* Nods head. *Can I go now?* *I need to put my shoes back on!* Gets up to leave.		
14:27 15:00	*Right Ella. This is a busy classroom. Can and tell me about it…* gasps – *I can see lots of people in your classroom. Who are they?* *One's called Mrs Blaine? Is Mrs Blaine in your classroom?* *Why did you put Mrs Blaine in your classroom?* *Because she's your favourite teacher. What does Mrs Blaine do in your classroom?* *She's doing the register. What do you do in your classroom?* *In the morning what do you do, and what do you do in the afternoon?*	Has her hand raised wanting to speak.		*Erm.. one's called erm Mrs Blaine.* Nods head. *She's my favourite teacher.* *She's doing the register.* *Erm.*	

				In the afternoon I do nothing!	
	You do nothing? What do you do in the morning?				
				Erm. I just play about.	
	You play about? What's your favourite things to play with?				
				Erm. My friends.	
	Your friends. There's lots of friends in this picture. Who's this down here?				
				A ladybird.	
15:30	*A ladybird! Why have you drawn a ladybird?*				
				Cos I'm in ladybirds.	
	You're in ladybirds.				
	Lola, before Ella goes, do you want to tell Ella what's in your classroom?				
		I'm not done yet.			
	You're not done? Ok, one more thing Lola.				
		I'm trying to finish all my Shopkins that I wanna do.			
	You want to finish all your Shopkins? Well I tell you what, if you want –				
		I haven't, I haven't got Suzie Soccerball though.			
	Would you like to go back in with your class and your grown ups and finish your drawing.				
		Yeah.			
	Yeah. Okey dokey Lola. Thank you Ella.				
		I'm going in to finish it.			
	Thanks girls.				
16:15	End of video				

Coach Lane Campus
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NE7 7XA

Where is the child? Putting children at the heart of the 'readiness' debate.
Letter of Invitation

Dear [head teacher's name],

My name is Laura Heads, and I am a PhD student at Northumbria University. I am conducting a research project on 'school readiness' under the supervision of Professor Michael Jopling and Dr. Charmaine Agius Ferrante. I am writing to invite you to consider taking part in this research.

Aims of the research
Recent English governments have placed a lot of importance on making sure young children are ready for Year 1. This is often referred to as 'school readiness'. This idea that the early years should make children ready for more formal schooling has caused a great deal of debate. For example, there are worries that too much emphasis is now being placed on promoting children's development in literacy and numeracy, rather than stimulating children's personal, social and emotional development. In research, lots of different people have been asked for their opinions on 'school readiness' but these people are mainly adults. This project would like to ask Reception children in four North Tyneside schools about what it means to be 'ready for school'. Therefore, the aim of the proposed project is to use children's views and experiences to develop a broader understanding of 'school readiness'.

Significance and background of the research project

- There are references to 'readiness' throughout the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) of 2014, which means 'readiness' is still highly relevant to schools and staff.
- The repetition of readiness in the EYFS has been perceived by some, as a signal that teachers ought to be planning a more 'academically grounded' curriculum. The revised higher levels of attainment in literacy and mathematics and the new Reception baseline tests further perpetuate this idea.
- Newspaper headlines in 2014, which suggested, *"Half of children are not ready to start school"* also placed 'school readiness' in the public eye.
- These headlines were based on figures relating to the number of children who had achieved a 'good level of development' at the end of the academic year 2012-2013. This suggests that children's 'readiness' is measurable.
- In all the discussions of 'school readiness' there appears to be one significant voice missing - the child. The view taken in this project is that children's wellbeing and self-perceptions of 'readiness' should be at the heart of future research. Before taking up my role as a postgraduate researcher I worked as a primary and early years teacher in North Tyneside schools for 7 years. This provides significant motivation for exploring 'readiness' from children's perspectives.

Benefits of taking part
The Reception children in your school will contribute towards developing a better understanding of 'school readiness'. I value children's opinions highly and believe that children's ideas can have a positive impact on education if they are given the

chance to be heard. Children also have the right to take part in research and can feel empowered when doing so. As part of the project, I would like to share the children's voices with your staff, as I believe the children's insights could be of great value to your staff in terms of their continuing professional development.

Research Plan and methods
Research data will be collected through small group activities, similar to those that Reception children would experience as part of the natural daily routine of classroom life. Drawing on my experience of working with early years children, I have tried to design the tasks so they are interesting, short and simple. They will involve working with puppets, drawing, talking or a mix of all these things. The activities will last no more than 20 minutes. The research would take place in a familiar school space such as in the classroom or library. I would work very closely with school staff to make sure the activities are a useful part of children's transition to Year 1.

Permission will be sought from the learners and their parents prior to their participation in the research. Only those who consent and whose parents consent will participate. All information collected will be treated in strictest confidence and neither the school nor individual learners will be identifiable in any reports that are written. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The role of the school is voluntary and the school may decide to withdraw participation at any time without penalty. This study will meet the requirements of the Research Ethics Committee of Northumbria University.

School Involvement
To help you make an informed decision about your school's participation in the study, I would very much appreciate the chance to meet you in person, at a time of your convenience. At this meeting I can give you more thorough information about the study and answer any questions you may have. If you are interested in taking part, and would like to organise a meeting of this nature, my contact details can be found below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Yours sincerely,

Laura Heads

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northumbria UNIVERSITY NEWCASTLE

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Study Title: Where is the child? Putting children at the heart of the 'readiness' debate.

Investigator: Miss Laura Heads

Participant Information Sheet

Your child is being invited to take part in this research study. Before you decide if you would like your child to take part it is important for you to read this leaflet so you understand why the study is being carried out and what it will involve.

Reading this leaflet, discussing it with others or asking any questions you might have will help you decide whether or not you would like to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

Recent English governments have placed a lot of importance on making sure young children, aged 4 and 5, are ready for Year 1. This idea that children can be made ready for more formal schooling has caused a great deal of debate.

Some of the issues raised in this debate include:

- What does it mean to be ready?
- What kinds of skills should teachers be trying to develop in children to make them ready?
- Is there a pressure on teachers to get children ready? How might this effect teaching and learning in Reception?
- How might children be affected?

In research, lots of different people have been asked for their opinions on school readiness but these people are mainly adults such as parents and teachers. This project would like to ask the children about getting ready for Year 1.

- Do children feel ready for Year 1?
- How might teachers help children get ready?
- Do children know what Year 1 might be like?

Why has my child been invited to take part?

Your child is in Reception and will soon be going into Year 1. This is an ideal opportunity to explore 'getting ready'.

Does my child have to take part?

No. It is up to you whether you are happy for your child to take part. I am giving you this information sheet to help you decide. Your child will also be involved in making the decision. They will be given information about the study in a child-friendly way. It may be that you are happy for your child to take part but your child would rather not. This decision will be accepted without question. Your child can stop being involved in the study at any time.

What will happen if my child takes part?

After you have signed the consent form your child will be asked if they would like to take part in a small group activity with some of his/her friends. The researcher has tried to design the tasks so they are interesting, short and simple. They will involve working with puppets, drawing, talking or a mix of all these things. The researcher may ask the children some questions to better understand their ideas. The activity will last no more than 20 minutes. The research will take place in a familiar school space such as the library or the classroom.

With your permission the researcher will video-record the activity to make sure she remembers everything the children talk about. The children will be given the chance to become familiar with the recording equipment and ask questions before the activity. The viewing of this visual recording will be limited to the children and teachers of <___> school, 3 professional researchers from Northumbria University (Professor Michael Jopling, Dr Charmaine Agius Ferrante and Julie Ovington), and 1 member of North Tyneside Council's school advisory team (Emma Packard). It is important for other people to view the video for 2 reasons: so the outcome of the research is not grounded in only one person's interpretation, and so that the children's voices are truly heard. After all, we would like children's views to have a positive impact on teaching and learning in schools. These people will not be given a copy of the video - only the researcher will have a copy of the video files.

As an alternative to video, the researcher also has voice-recording equipment. If you would prefer your child to be voice recorded rather than videoed, you can tick this option on the consent form.

After the study

To check that the researcher has understood the children's ideas, she may ask to chat with the children again to explain what she thinks she has learnt from them. The researcher might play the video and voice recording back to the children as part of this process. The children will then be given the opportunity to say whether the researcher has understood their conversations correctly.

After the study has been completed the researcher will give you a sheet explaining the nature of the research, how you can find out about the results, and how you can withdraw your child's data if you wish. General feedback relating to the overall outcomes of the study will be provided; individual feedback on specific children will not be given.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

The project will explore the idea of children getting ready for Year 1. This is perhaps something your child will not have thought about much before and though unlikely, it might generate some feelings of apprehension. The researcher is a trained teacher and will be sensitive to the children's responses. They do not have to speak in the activities if they don't want to. Encouraging children to be open about their thoughts and feelings might help children make sense of their transition to Year 1. The researcher will work very closely with the class teacher to make it a helpful, positive discussion.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your child will contribute towards developing a better understanding of 'school readiness'. The researcher of this project values children's opinions highly. She believes that children's ideas can have a positive impact on education if children are given the chance to be heard. Children also have the right to take part in research and can feel empowered when doing so.

Will my child taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

Yes. Your child's name will not be written on any of the data we collect. Your child's name will not be written on the recorded interviews, or on the typed up versions of their discussions. His/her name will not appear in any reports or documents resulting from this study. The consent form you have signed will be stored separately from your other data. The data collected from your child in this study will be confidential.

How will my data be stored?

Children's drawings, the typed up versions of their conversations and your consent forms will be kept in locked storage. All electronic data including the video recordings will be stored on the University U drive, which is password protected, and accessible only to Miss Laura Heads. All data will be stored in accordance with University guidelines and the Data Protection Act (1998).

What will happen to the results of the study?

The general findings will be written up in the researcher's final project. These findings may also be reported in a research journal or presented at a research conference. However the data will never include children's names. We can provide you with a summary of the findings from the study if you email the researcher at the address listed below.

Who is organising and funding the study?

The study has been organised and funded by Northumbria University.

Who has reviewed this study?

Before this study could begin, permissions were obtained from Northumbria University.

Contact for further information:
laura.heads@northumbria.ac.uk
michael.jopling@northumbria.ac.uk

Name of another person who can provide independent information or advice about the project

mick.hill@northumbria.ac.uk

FORM TO AMEND AN APPROVED ETHICS PROJECT

Principal Investigator	Laura Heads
Project Title	Where is the child? Putting children at the heart of the 'school readiness' debate.
Project Code (where applicable)	Not issued on original form
Date of original ethical approval	11TH May 2016
Date of amendment request	March 2017

Description of Amendment:

Study One

In my original ethics application I described the 'illuminative' nature of my first study:

Rather than formulate a concrete plan, I wish to assume an open-ended approach that allows for the research to evolve over time. This kind of fluidity and dynamism in approach is aligned more successfully to qualitative research methodology (Lichtman, 2002) and has characteristics of Parlett and Hamilton's (1985) social anthropological paradigm of illuminative evaluation. In the design of this research, an initial study (study 1) aims to use children's perspectives to 'illuminate' the realities of 'school readiness' and uncover issues that warrant further investigation. As such, the design of this project could also be likened to Stake's (1981) notion of 'progressive focusing', which is to use broad, general questions to begin, and focus on issues 'gradually'.

As referred to above, Study One used an open-ended approach under the emergent theme of 'school readiness' and took place during the summer term of the academic year 2015/2016 with Reception children (aged 4 and 5) as they prepared for their transition to Year 1. Following this study I have worked to 'piece together' (Moss and Clark, 2011) the individual mosaics (transcripts, children's pictures etc.) as a means of uncovering emerging themes. During this process, I also drew on teachers' interpretations of the data and used the children's voices to encourage a reflective dialogue about 'school readiness' between practitioners. I am now in a position to explore some of these themes, as part of a second study. These themes include:

- 'Readiness' as a feeling of happiness
- Children's desire to be 'more grown up' and physically able
- Children's interests and their value of play and popular culture
- A dichotomy between play and learning

Children's varied responses and approaches to the tasks were also revealing of a broader theme of interest, namely children's developing sense of who they are and who they are becoming. I am therefore keen to delve a little deeper into Reception children's emerging identities and the stories they tell about themselves and each other.

FORM TO AMEND AN APPROVED ETHICS PROJECT

Study Two

For my second study, I would like to assume a project-like approach whereby I can explore Reception children's thinking about school and themselves, through alternative play-based methods, over a series of sessions. Certainly, I felt one of the limitations of my first study was the 'on-the-spot' nature of the focus group tasks, which asked the children for their opinions on topics they'd not considered before, preventing opportunity for detailed reflection. The tasks were also fairly language-driven, which I felt limited the participation of quieter children.

In the design of this second study, I have drawn much inspiration from the research of David Gauntlett (2006, 2007), who has worked on helping people communicate ideas about their identities and experiences, through 'making things' and reflecting on the process and the outcome. Gauntlett draws on the 'therapeutic value of creative activity' as part his rationale (Gauntlett, 2006), as well as the work of Merleau-Ponty (1945), who discussed the body as a central dimension of experience. During Study One of this project, many children placed a good deal of emphasis on the physical abilities of their body, suggesting that their physicality stood as an important dimension of their childhoods. Throughout Study One discussions, many children also made reference to their enjoyment of play and using artefacts such as Lego and other construction materials. A 'playful' approach would therefore reflect and respect these interests.

For Study Two, I would therefore like to run a Reception after-school 'ideas' club, whereby the children and I could embark on practical making projects.

Ideas for activities include:

- Using junk modelling to build a 'perfect' classroom
- Asking children to build a model of themselves using Lego, as prompted by the picture book 'Can I build another me?' (Yositake, 2016).
- Using mirrors to help children build self-portraits out of loose parts.

I also believe there would be scope for the children themselves to shape the content of some of these sessions.

In a sense, the club would become a mini transition project before the children's move to Year One; however, it would not be framed in this way with the children. The extended nature of the project, and the re-examination of themes each week, could allow for development of children's thinking on particular topics, and would hopefully allow me some insight into the lives of Reception children at this pivotal point in their schooling. Framing it as an after-school club might also offer benefits by positioning their ideas away from the school day. Data would take the form of observational notes, as well as the concrete 'made' objects' and I believe there would be scope to piece together this data in the form of case studies.

FORM TO AMEND AN APPROVED ETHICS PROJECT

Further important details of study two are as follows:

Sample and Recruitment

- I hope to work in three of the four schools, which took part in the original study. This will mean working with a familiar group of Reception teachers, but with a different cohort of Reception children. These schools are based in North Tyneside. I have chosen to only work in three schools, rather than four, for practical reasons. Running the after-school clubs will likely be time consuming in terms of preparation and delivery and I also need to consider the volume of data I am likely to collect.
- I will carry out a pilot study of the approach at Southridge First School, where I was employed as a full time teacher before my studies. This means I am already a familiar face to the children, and very familiar to the staff. I would like to carry out this pilot study in the first half of the summer term (late April/May 2017).
- I would then like to run after-school clubs in two further schools during the second half of the summer term (June/July 2017) for approximately 6 weeks.
- For Study Two, the aim is to invite all Reception children in each school to attend the club. Ideally, in each school I would work with between 6-8 children, however this may vary depending on the response rate and interest in the club. By keeping the group numbers low, I hope to be afforded greater opportunity to get to know individual children and for the group to work together on some of the activities.
- As in Study One, I am keen to share children's voices with their teachers, as part of the interpretation process. I would also like to include Year One teachers in these discussions. This is because the children will be in Year One by the time their voices are shared, and this could therefore prompt some interesting reflection about young children and their transition into and Key Stage One.

Consent

- Parents/carers will play an important role in the consent process. An informed consent model of 'opt in' will be adopted as well as a model of assent, as described in my original ethics application.
- I will try to be honest and open with the children about my role as a researcher, as described in my original ethics application. I'll explain to the children about how much I value their ideas and that I'd love to find out more about them.
- Before any research activities take place I would like to spend some time in schools becoming familiar with the children. This also gives me a chance to find out about their interests and perhaps be led by these interests in the design of some of the activities.

Reasons for Amendment/Change:

The details of this second study could not be outlined in my original ethics application, given the emergent nature of my study design. In my first study I drew specific influence from Clark and Moss' (2011) 'mosaic approach'. In this way, I used four different drawing

and talk-based tasks, with different groups of four Reception school, at the four different school sites. A limitation of this approach was the 'on-the-spot nature of the tasks. I believe that the design of Study Two has the potential to offer a more detailed study of the topic given the time I will spend with the children; this I have identified as a desirable outcome for this next phase of the research. As Gauntlett (2006) described, this approach isn't necessarily better, but it offers an alternative way to 'engage the brain' and draw a 'different kind of response'.

Anticipated Implications:

Unlike the first study, I will not be using video equipment to record my time with the children. I'd like to assume the role of a participant observer, as part of a semi-ethnographic approach - I will not be one of the group, yet I will be there to help the group. As indicated previously, data will take the form of observational notes, as well as concrete 'made' objects'. I might also use voice recording in some instances to capture the children's ideas, as well as cameras to document the making process. I would like to offer children the opportunity to take ownership of some of these recordings, such as by taking the photographs themselves. Also, the children and I could listen back to their voices as part of the reflection process. The use of voice recordings and cameras are reflected in the consent documents.

I expect there will be some practical elements to think about too, such as the sourcing of construction materials and the setting up of activities before the end of the school day. This will involve some negotiation with the teachers and I will be led by their preferences in terms of organisation. It is likely the after-school club will take place in a classroom, art room or familiar school environment. I will also need to make firm plans regarding the handover of the children to parents/carers at the end of the after-school club (at 4:30pm) – this handover will need to be overseen by the children's class teachers.

References

Gaunlett, D and Holzwarth, P (2006) 'Creative and visual methods for exploring identities', *Visual Studies*, 21(1), pp. 82-91.

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Stake, R. E. (1981). 'The Art of Progressive Focusing. In: Proceedings of the 65th Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association'. Los Angeles.

Yoshitake, S (2016*) Can I build another me?* London: Thames and Hudson.

FORM TO AMEND AN APPROVED ETHICS PROJECT

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE ETHICS COORDINATOR

Acceptance/Rejection (Circle as appropriate)	Signature: Name:
Date:	

Follow-up action passed to:
Reason for Rejection:

‘Ideas Club’ – Consent Form

Please tick where applicable

I understand that this after-school club is part of a research study.	☐
I have carefully read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.	☐
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study via email or phone	☐
I understand I am free to withdraw my child from the study at any time, without having to give a reason for withdrawing, and without prejudice.	☐
I am happy for my child to take part in this after-school club.	☐

RECORDINGS
I hereby consent for the following recordings to be made:

Please tick where applicable

Recording	Purpose	Yes	No
Voice recordings	To record what the children say so the researcher can listen back to the discussion. To share children’s voices with teachers.	☐	☐
Photographs	To record what the children make and help them reflect on their time in the club. Photographs with children’s faces will not be used as a part of the write up of this project.	☐	☐

Signature of Parent / Guardian.....

Date.....……..

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....……

Signature of researcher.....

Date.....……..

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS).....……

northumbria UNIVERSITY NEWCASTLE

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

Study Title: Where is the child? Putting children at the heart of the 'readiness' debate.

Investigator: Miss Laura Heads

Your child is being invited to take part in an after-school club. The information I collect during the club will form a part of my research study and help me answer some questions about 'school readiness'. Before you decide if you would like your child to take part it is important for you to read this leaflet so you understand why the study is being carried out and what it will involve.

Reading this leaflet, discussing it with others or asking any questions you might have will help you decide whether or not you would like to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

Recent English governments have placed a lot of importance on making sure young children, aged 4 and 5, are ready for Year 1. This idea that children can be made 'ready' for more formal schooling has caused a great deal of debate. In research, lots of different people have been asked for their opinions on school readiness but these people are mainly adults such as parents and teachers – in my research, I decided I wanted to speak to children instead.

During my first study last summer (July, 2016), I worked with different groups of Reception children and talked to them about getting ready for Year 1. They had lots of interesting ideas about school and about themselves. I shared some of the children's ideas with their teachers and it got them thinking about what 'school readiness' means.

Now I would like to follow this research up with a second study, exploring and celebrating the uniqueness of Reception children. I'd like to do this by working with small groups of Reception children as part of an after-school club. I would like to show that 'school readiness' is more than just about reading, writing and maths and that children have amazing ideas beyond these subjects.

Why has my child been invited to take part?

Your child is in Reception and will soon be going into Year 1. This is an ideal opportunity to explore Reception children's ideas.

Does my child have to take part?

No. It is up to you whether you are happy for your child to take part. I am giving you this information sheet to help you decide. Your child will also be involved in making the decision. They will be given information about the after-school club in a child-friendly way. It may be that you are happy for your child to take part but your child would rather not. This decision will be accepted without question. Your child can stop being involved in the club at any time.

What will happen if my child takes part?

After you have signed the consent form, your child will be asked if they would like to take part in the after-school club too. The after-school club will run for six weeks on a <___> night, 3:30-4:30pm. I have tried to design the club so it's very practical for the children and involves making, building and sharing ideas about school and perhaps about themselves. The research will take place in a familiar school space such as the library or the classroom.

As the children work on their ideas, I might take some notes about what the children say and ask them questions about their ideas. With permission, I might even use photographs or a voice recorder to capture this. The children will be always be given the chance to say whether they are happy to be recorded. The children can listen back to recordings or look at the photographs too.

There will only be a small number of people who will also listen to voice recordings – this will be limited to the children and teachers of <___> school, three professional researchers from Northumbria University (Professor Michael Jopling, Dr Charmaine Agius Ferrante and Julie Ovington), and one member of North Tyneside Council's school advisory team (Emma Packard). It is important for other people to listen to the children's voices for two reasons: so the outcome of the research is not grounded in only my interpretation, and so that the children's voices are truly heard.

To check that I have understood the children's ideas, I may ask to chat with the children again to explain what I think I have learnt from them. I might play voice recordings back to the children as part of this process. The children will then be given the opportunity to say whether I have understood their conversations correctly.

After the study has been completed I will give you a sheet explaining the nature of the research, how you can find out about the results, and how you can withdraw your child's data if you wish. General feedback relating to the overall outcomes of the study will be provided; individual feedback on specific children will not be given.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

During the after-school club, children might explore ideas themselves and about school. I am a trained teacher and I will be sensitive to the children's responses. Children do not have to speak during the activities if they don't want to. I'd like to think that encouraging children to be open about their thoughts might help them make sense of why they are special - I would like the club to be a celebration of who they are!

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your child will contribute towards developing a broader understanding of 'school readiness'. I value children's ideas highly and I believe that children's ideas can have a positive impact on education if children are given the chance to be heard. Children also have the right to take part in research and can feel empowered when doing so.

Will my child taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

Yes. Your child's name will not be written on any of the data I collect. The consent form you have signed will be stored separately from your other data. The data collected from your child in this study will be confidential.

How will my data be stored?

Children's drawings, typed up versions of their conversations and your consent forms will be kept in locked storage. Any electronic data including the voice recordings will be stored on the University U drive, which is password protected, and accessible only to Miss Laura Heads. All data will be stored in accordance with University guidelines and the Data Protection Act (1998).

What will happen to the results of the study?

The general findings will be written up in my final project. These findings may also be reported in a research journal or presented at a research conference. However the data will never include children's names. I can provide you with a summary of the findings from the study if you email me at the address listed below.

Who is organising and funding the study?

The study has been organised and funded by Northumbria University.

Who has reviewed this study?

Before this study could begin, permissions were obtained from Northumbria University.

Contact for further information:
laura.heads@northumbria.ac.uk
michael.jopling@northumbria.ac.uk

Name of another person who can provide independent information or advice about the project

mick.hill@northumbria.ac.uk

Research Proposal Form

Depending on your research study, you may need to include supporting documentary evidence as part of this form. Please refer to the University Research Ethics and Governance handbook, or those provided by your Faculty or Service Department for information about the type of evidence you need to provide.

Project title:	Where is the child? Putting children at the heart of the 'school readiness' date.

Submitter information

Name:

Status: ☐ Staff ☒ PG research ☐ PG taught ☐ Undergraduate

Faculty:

Department:

Email:

Principal Supervisor (if relevant):

Risk status: ☒ Red ☐ Amber

Please list your co-investigators:

Professor Michael Jopling
Dr Charmaine Agius Ferrante

Data Source

Tick all relevant boxes that apply to your proposed research and then make sure that you also complete **all** of the relevant sections.

1. People and/or personal data of a living individual ☒

Participants are defined as including living human beings; also included are human beings who have recently died, embryos and foetuses, human tissue and bodily fluids, where the remains/body parts etc are still held on NHS premises and require specific permission from the NHS to access. This also includes human data and records (such as but not restricted to medical, genetic, financial, personnel, criminal or administrative records including scholastic achievements. Personal data is defined as any identifiable information that affects a person's privacy such as information which is biographical in a significant sense or has the relevant individual as its focus rather than some other person or some transaction or event. This includes video/audio and photographic materials.

PLEASE COMPLETE SECTIONS: 1, 6, 7, 8, 9

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2. Human Tissue ☐

Any material that has come from a human body that consists of, or includes human cells, with the exception of hair and nails from living people, and live gametes and embryos created outside the human body.

PLEASE COMPLETE SECTIONS: 2, 6, 7, 8, 9

3. Animal Subjects ☐

Any living vertebrate, other than man, and any living cephalopod.

PLEASE COMPLETE SECTIONS: 3, 7, 8, 9

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4. Secondary data (not in public domain) ☐

Secondary data involves the use of existing data (not in the public domain) with the permission of the Data Controller for purposes other than those for which they were originally collected. Secondary data may be obtained from many sources, including surveys, computer databases and information systems.

PLEASE COMPLETE SECTIONS: 4, 6, 7, 8, 9

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5. Environmental Data ☐

Any outdoor fieldwork in rural, coastal, marine or urban environments and the temporary or long term effects the research study may have on people, animals or the natural or built environment.

6. None of the above (please explain) ☐

1. PEOPLE AND/OR PERSONAL DATA

If you are involving human participants, or are gathering personal data about a living individual then please complete all of the sub-sections in section 1.

A: RESEARCH AIMS

State your research aims/questions (maximum 500 words). This should provide the theoretical context within which the work is placed, and should include an evidence-based background, justification for the research, and clearly stated hypotheses (if appropriate):

Despite its long history, reflecting and influencing national and international political agendas, the concept of 'school readiness' remains ambiguous and complex (Tickell, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). At an abstract level, 'school readiness' is generally agreed to be preparation in children's early years for success at school, however debate continues over the crucial components of child development that affect this success (Snow, 2006) and the relative responsibility of schools, families and communities. At a macro level, there are references to 'readiness' throughout the most recently revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework (DfE, 2014). Newspaper headlines in 2014, which suggested, *"Half of children are not ready to start school"* (Telegraph, 2014), also placed 'readiness' in the public eye and further highlighted its position in policy. There is widespread unease that these pressures, to 'ready' children with a prescribed set of knowledge and skills, are having a negative impact on early years practice and children's wellbeing (BERA and TACTYC, 2014; PACEY, 2013; Whitebread and Bingham, 2011). These concerns provide significant motivation for examining children's experiences of 'readiness' and developing a broader understanding of the impact of this policy upon early years children.

A discussion of the competences considered key for achieving 'readiness' is a recurring theme of the 'readiness' debate. Generally, these are described in two categories: cognitive abilities related to academic achievement and personal social-emotional attributes; however this may be considered an arbitrary division given the close links between the two (Prior *et al*., 2011). A seemingly unexpanded area of this discussion is an understanding of the balance of, and synergy between, the knowledge and skills that best develop these competences in young children. New understandings of brain development (exemplified in the work of Gowsami, 2015) and an interest in developing children's capacities for metacognition (an awareness of one's own cognition, Pramling, 1988) add further complexity to this discussion. Notably, it is the concept of metacognition that underpins many of the fervently endorsed 'Learning to learn' and 'Visible Learning' approaches widely discussed in educational research (Campaign for Learning, 2013; Nottingham, 2013; Hattie, 2009; Hewitt, 2008; EEF, 2015; Let me Learn, 2008). Examining how these approaches link to success at school, and their position within the existing amalgam of knowledge, skills and learning prescribed in the EYFS, is an area of research the proposed

project will focus on.

PROJECT AIM: To use children's views and experiences to develop a broader understanding of 'school readiness'. Acknowledging the child's voice in this way will represent an original contribution to knowledge in the 'readiness' debate.

The research will address the following questions:

- Do children feel 'ready' for their future schooling?
- What are children's perceptions of their own 'readiness'? How does this compare to the views of parents and practitioners?
- What combination of knowledge, skills and learning best 'ready' children for life beyond the early years? How might 'learning to learn' approaches support the development of these areas?
- What, if any, are the implications of an increasingly academic early years curriculum for children's development and overall wellbeing?

References

BERA and TACTYC (2014) *Early Years: Policy Advice and Future Research Agendas.* Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Early-Years-Policy-BERA-TACTYC2.pdf?noredirect=1 (Downloaded: September 2015).

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Pramling, I. (1988) 'Developing children's thinking about their own learning', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *58*(3), pp.266-278.

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UNICEF(2012) *School Readiness: A Conceptual Framework.* New York: United Nations Children's Fund.

Whitebread, D., & Bingham, S. (2011) *School Readiness; a critical review of perspectives and evidence. TACTYC occasional paper, 2*. Available at: http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-paper/occasional-paper2.pdf (Downloaded: September 2015).

B: STUDY DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

Please provide a description of the study design, methodology (e.g. quantitative, qualitative), the sampling strategy, methods of data collection (e.g. survey, interview, experiment, observation), and analysis

CHILDREN AS PARTICIPANTS

Given the variety of stakeholders involved in the discussion of 'school readiness', each with their own conceptions about the knowledge, skills and competences most crucial to school success (Snow, 2006), it is not surprising that reaching a 'readiness' definition raises more questions than answers. This ambiguity is prevalent in the wealth of historical and contemporary research literature available, much of which has sought to give voice to these various views. However in all these discussions there appears to be one significant voice missing - the child. The view taken in this project is that children's self-perceptions and emotional experiences of 'readiness' should be at the heart of future research. Only by listening to children might we truly begin to make sense of the multi-layered issues surrounding this debate, and whether the associated criticisms of 'readiness' policy are founded. A strong aspiration to work with, and include the 'voice' of the child also stems from personal values developed during the researcher's career as a primary school teacher and her specific experience of working with early years children. In the context of teaching, the researcher has found young children to have an insightful understanding of themselves, of others, and of their surroundings; an opinion supported by the work of many researchers (Cocks, 2006; Alderson, 2000; Moss and Clark, 2011). Inevitably, this perspective on children will influence many elements of the proposed project including the choice of methods, and analysis of data (Christensen and Prout, 2002). For this reason a highly reflexive approach will be of significant

importance throughout the research process particularly given the unique ethical dilemmas that working with young children raises.

OPEN-ENDED, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Given the researcher's aims to understand children's lived experiences of 'readiness', this project will rely greatly on verbal and visual communication to generate data (Lichtman, 2002). For this reason, a qualitative 'people-focused' approach to knowledge construction is seen as an appropriate means of investigation. Rather than formulate a concrete plan, the researcher also wishes to assume an open-ended approach that allows for the research to evolve over time. This kind of fluidity and dynamism in approach is aligned more successfully to qualitative research methodology (Lichtman, 2002) and has characteristics of Parlett and Hamilton's (1985) social anthropological paradigm of illuminative evaluation. Parlett and Hamilton's (1985) model was originally developed as an alternative to traditional, outcome-led curricula evaluation, focusing instead on individuals, and the complex realities of working with new educational 'programs'. In the design of this research, an initial study (study 1) aims to use children's perspectives to 'illuminate' the realities of 'school readiness' and uncover issues that warrant further investigation. As such, the design of this project could also be likened to Stake's (1981) notion of 'progressive focusing', that is to use broad, general questions to begin, and focus on issues 'gradually'.

MULTI-METHOD APPROACH

Children are not a single, homogenous group of people (Christensen and Prout, 2002) and for this reason a multi-method, multi-sensory approach will be implemented, recognising that children have a broad range of capacities and there will not be one single method that fits all children and their contexts (Crivello *et al*., 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; Lundy et al, 2011; Clark, 2005). The project will draw specific influence from Clark and Moss' (2011) 'mosaic approach', which was originally developed during a research study to include the 'voice of the child' in an evaluation of multiagency services (Clark, 2005). Interpretivist in nature, this methodology is embedded in practice and seeks to focus on the lived experience of our youngest of children in education (Clark and Moss, 2011). The researcher considers that 'mosaic methods' are fit for the purpose of the research to be undertaken and especially sensitive to young children's particular competencies. However, such methods will not be adopted without critical reflection, particularly given that the need for distinctive research methods for children has been called into question (Punch, 2002; Thomson, 2007). It is for this reason that a short period of piloting will be included as part of the reflexive process.

STUDY 1

For the first study, the researcher will work in consultation with North Tyneside Council's School Improvement Team to select a purposive sample of four North Tyneside schools in contrasting socio-economic catchment areas. From within

these schools, a purposive sample of boys and girls from Reception will be chosen. Using teacher assessment of individuals' attainment towards the early learning goals, the aim is to include a reasonable cross-section of children based on their perceived 'readiness' for Year 1, however the researcher would like to work with as many consenting children as possible from within these schools until the point at which data saturation occurs. During this principal stage of project development there will be a short phase of piloting in one particular school, where the researcher is already familiar to the children as a teacher. This piloting phase should help the researcher refine and amend the delivery of the small group activities (described below and in section F). New ideas might also emerge, as prompted by the children's responses.

Study 1 will use an open-ended approach under the emergent theme of 'school readiness' and will take place during the summer term of the academic year 2015/2016 with Reception children (aged 4 and 5) as they prepare for their transition to Year 1. By using an emergent theme, the project will attempt to untie the research from adult interests, blending open-ended 'school readiness' questions with opportunities for children to contribute their own ideas. This is considered a positive process in the development of child-centred research (Hill *et al*., 1996). Active 'mosaic' methods will be drawn from three distinct categories: drawing, talking and activity. Methods will include techniques such as persona dolls (puppets) and 'draw and tell'. As advised by McLeod, (2008), concrete, visual prompts will also be used during the process, given the abstract nature of 'school readiness'. For example, a 'feelings thermometer' might help children articulate the strength of their feelings (Hill *et al*., 1996) and artefacts produced through mosaic methods, such as drawings, could provide stimuli for further conversation (Groundwater-Smith, 2014). In using a range of methods, the research aims to establish which are the most effective for accessing children's perspectives and sustaining their interest (Lancaster, 2003, Hill *et al*., 1996). Asking children to reflect on the activities will also be a useful part of this process (Hill, 2006; Morgan *et al*, 2002).

The mosaic methods described above will be carried out in the context of semi-structured focus group discussions, allowing conversation to be interspersed with task-based activity. This format can be particularly useful in facilitating the participation of quieter children as noted in a study by Morgan *et al*. (2002) in which focus group methods afforded new insights into children's experiences of living with asthma. An understanding in using this approach can also be drawn from a study by Hill *et al*. (1996), in which focus groups were used to engage primary-aged children in conversations about their emotions and wellbeing. With the methods of that particular study in mind, this project proposes to carry out focus group sessions as part of the natural daily routine of classroom life, with different groups of six children taking part in each of the activities. While the children in each of these groups will be similar in some ways (similar age, same class), the researcher recognises the value in not striving for shared group norms (as described by Wibeck *et al*., 2007); and that differences between participants can add an interesting dynamic in terms of how children present their own point of view in relation to others perspectives (Kitzinger, 1994). Different groups can also be used for different purposes, as suggested by Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (2009) in their account of an 'emergent-systematic' focus

group design. In this project it is likely that initial focus group tasks will be used for exploratory purposes whereas others will be used 'systematically' to verify and test themes.

Focus group sessions are considered an appropriate method for this phase of the project given their potential for examining participants' perceptions, experiences and needs (Hennessy and Heary, 2005; Krueger and Casey, 2015). It may be inferred too, that groups of peers can dilute the inevitable adult/child power asymmetries inherent in this type of research (Morgan *et al*., 2002; Hennessy and Heary, 2005), particularly in comparison to a one-to-one interview situation (Hill, 2006). In this instance the children will also know each other well and are likely to be more comfortable in sharing information (Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Mayall, 2000; Vaughn *et al*., 1996). Matters such as the facilitation of discussion, the handling of sensitive topics, children's interpretation of questions and the individual characteristics of children form other general issues of focus group research (Bloor *et al*., 2001; Morgan *et al*, 2002; Kitzinger, 1994; Hennessy and Heary, 2005) and are considered further below.

RECORDING THE DISCUSSIONS

Using video equipment, with parental consent, is the researcher's preferred method for recording the focus group discussions, given the potential benefits afforded by this medium for studying non-verbal communication. Video data could also turn out to be a valuable tool during the second phase of study, exploring the potential of children's voices to change perceptions of 'readiness' amongst the teachers of the participating schools. This idea is resonated in the writing of Pirie (1996), in which she states "*if we are to exploit the richness of this form of data…we will wish for others to see it, to add their analysis to our own"* (*pp.10*). While video is the preferred recording method, the researcher acknowledges that some parents will be reluctant for their child to take part if video is used. For this reason audio recording will be offered as an alternative to video on the parental consent form so not to risk excluding children.

ANALYSIS OF STUDY 1 DATA

A process of constant comparison analysis will occur throughout study 1 allowing the researcher to anticipate and assess the point at which data saturation occurs (see section Ci for further details). This will include the researcher making notes directly after the focus group sessions, documenting the general tone of the conversation, key topics and any unexpected ideas. Following this study there will be a more thorough period of analysis whereby the individual mosaics (transcripts, children's pictures etc.) are 'pieced together' as a means of uncovering any emerging themes (Moss and Clark, 2011). As part of this process, a transcript for each focus group activity will be produced and a coding frame developed through which the content will be analysed. As advised by Barbour (2007), the coding frame will be continually subjected to review and will be flexible enough to incorporate unexpected themes and disconfirming examples. Analysis of focus group data will not be purely content-driven. A combination of methods is recommended (Halkier, 2010; Wibeck *et al*., 2007;

Barbour, 2007; Swan, 1994) so to provide a rounder, more complete picture of spoken language. This means the researcher drawing upon other forms of analysis such as conversation and discourse methods, understanding that focus groups are social enactments, and social interaction dynamics are significant in illuminating content and context (Halkier, 2010; Barbour, 2007). The researcher also proposes to actively involve children in the interpretation of data throughout the process and at its conclusion to check how accurately participants' realities have been represented in the final account (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Additionally, teachers (from the individual schools) and other professionals from Northumbria University and North Tyneside Council (Professor Michael Jopling, Dr. Charmaine Agius Ferrante, Julie Ovington and Emma Packard) will be involved in the interpretation of data. The results of this study will be used to inform the next phase of the project.

PHASE 2 OF THE PROJECT

This second phase of the research is hard to detail with specificities given that it will follow themes of significance that emerge from study 1. As described previously, this kind of approach is akin to Stake's (1981) model of 'progressive focusing', where by the researcher is not committed to a definite plan. Study 1 will hopefully allow the researcher to become acquainted with the classroom complexities of 'school readiness', before carrying out further inquiry. It may also be that the project can move beyond consultation, to a more participatory process whereby children are involved in development and monitoring of a new phase of the research (Groundwater-Smith *et al*., 2014).

While the researcher wishes to assume an open-ended approach, there are particular issues and threads of interest that she anticipates may be worth exploring in this second phase. For example, there could be value in investigating how the data collected in study 1, the child's voice, has the potential to change teachers and parents perceptions of 'readiness' and how this might impact on practice in individual school contexts. The researcher also has an interest in exploring the place of 'learning to learn' and 'visible learning' strategies in the 'readiness' debate. Given the researcher's links with a nursery in Midlothian County Council, where 'visible learning' practice is being developed, there might be an opportunity to participate in a process of evaluative enquiry with these professionals. The nature of this link could also lead to comparisons between early years curricula in England and Scotland.

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Ci SAMPLE

Provide details of the sample groups that will be involved in the study and include details of their location (whether recruited in the UK or from abroad) and any organizational affiliation. For most research studies, this will cover: the number of sample groups; the size of each sample group; the criteria that will be used to select the sample group(s) (e.g. gender, age, sexuality, health conditions).If the sample will include NHS staff or patients please state this clearly. If this is a pilot study and the composition of the sample has not yet been confirmed, please provide as many details as possible.

STUDY 1 – SUMMER TERM 2016

- The sample of children for study 1 will be recruited from within North Tyneside schools, England.
- The sample of children will be a mixture of boys and girls.
- The sample of children will be in the summer term of their first year of compulsory full time education (Reception, the final year of the Early Years Foundation Stage).
- The sample of children will either have had their 5th birthday in the academic year 2015-2016, or will turn 5 before 1st September 2016.
- The researcher will work with children from a purposive sample of four schools - please see section Ciii for further details.

- A guiding principle in determining sample size will be data saturation; the point at which no new or significant information occurs (Saumure and Given, 2008). A multiple focus group design can be useful in anticipating saturation (Onwuegbuzie *et al*., 2009).
- While the project will be primarily guided by the principle of data saturation, the researcher also considers it useful to indicate an approximate sample size target of 36 children from across the 4 schools.
- Each child will take part in 1 focus group activity.
- Given the timing of study 1 in the summer term, the Reception children taking part in this phase of the research will have been assessed by their teachers against the Early Years Foundation Stage's 'Early Learning Goals' and given a summative judgement of 'Emerging', 'Expected' or 'Exceeding'. This judgment is based on teacher assessment evidence collated throughout the year. Children are considered to have achieved a 'Good Level of Development' (EYFS, 2014) and are perhaps perceived as 'ready' for Year 1 if they have been given a judgement of 'Expected' progress in the following areas – 'Personal, Social and Emotional Development', 'Communication and Language', 'Physical Development,' 'Literacy' and 'Mathematics'. The aim is for the sample to include a reasonable cross-section of children, based on their perceived 'readiness' for Year 1.

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Saumure, K. and Given, L. (2008) 'Data Saturation', in Given, L. (ed.) The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods. London: SAGE, pp.195-196.

Will your study involve vulnerable people? Refer to the University 'Policy on Research Involving Children and Vulnerable Adults' for definitions and examples of "vulnerable".

[x] Yes [ ] No

If yes: Describe what role, if any, parents/carers/consultees will take in the study:

PARENTS/CARERS

Parent/carers will play an important role in the consent process – see section D for further details. The perceptions of parents might also be investigated in the second phase of study.

Cii If you will be including personal data of living individuals, please specify the nature of this data, and (if appropriate) include details of the relevant individuals who have provided permission to utilise this data, upload evidence of these permissions in the supporting documentation section.

Ciii. RECRUITMENT

Describe the step by step process of how you will contact and recruit your research sample and name any organisations or groups that will be approached. Your recruitment strategy must be appropriate to the research study and the sensitivity of the subject area. You must have received written permission from any organizations or groups before you begin recruiting participants. Copies of draft requests for organizational consent must be included in the 'Supporting Documentary Evidence'. You must also provide copies of any recruitment emails/posters that will be used in your study.

STEP 1

The first step in the process of recruiting a research sample will be to speak to local authority advisors at North Tyneside Council's School Improvement Team, including specialist Early Years Advisor Emma Packard. Her insight into the region's schools will be instrumental in the selection of a sample of four North Tyneside schools. For example, she might be aware of schools that are keen to be involved in research, or schools who take a unique approach to implementing the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2014). For the purpose of this study, these schools will ideally be in contrasting socio-economic catchment areas, taking into account school deprivation indicator numbers. The researcher's existing contacts in a number of schools throughout North Tyneside will also be a further consideration, given the practical access that these existing professional relationships may afford.

STEP 2

The next step will be to contact the individual head teachers of selected schools through formal means of a letter (please see supporting document), with the aim of organising an initial meeting with head teachers to discuss the research, including ethical issues such as confidentiality. These kinds of meetings can also help the researcher gain insight into what the institutions will expect and require of her (Christensen and Prout, 2002). Given that study 1 is an exploratory study, it might not be possible to inform potential participants about the full extent of the research project thereafter. However, given that access is an ongoing process (Coffey, 2006), it is appreciated that access for future phases of study would need to be renegotiated. Head teachers may need to consult with governors and staff before making a decision about taking part in the project (Farrimond, 2013). If the schools agree to being involved, their formal written permission will be requested. I will then seek informed 'opt in' consent from individual parents and children - please refer to Section D for further details.

Schools that are likely to be approached:

1. **Southridge First School** – an 'outstanding' coastal school based in an affluent area of Whitley Bay. The proportion of pupils entitled to pupil premium funding is lower than average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is also lower than average. Nearly all of the pupils are of White British heritage. The researcher previously spent 6 years teaching at this school, and continues to teach there regularly, in a supply-teaching role. This dual role of teacher/researcher introduces particular ethical considerations, such as impartiality, role identity and over-rapport with participants (Atkins and Wallace, 2012), however the benefits of the researcher's familiarity with the school and the Reception children are considered to be more significant. For example, the researcher may be able to explore trickier, more sensitive topics when there are trusting, interpersonal relationships with the children already in place. The researcher intends to involve teachers, children and other professionals in the interpretation of data to negate some of the concerns associated with 'insider' research. The research will also be situated in the context of previous, relevant studies of children's views.
2. **Appletree Gardens First School** – a larger than average 'good' first school also based in Whitley Bay. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium is above the national average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is broadly average. The proportion supported through school action plus or who have a statement of special educational needs is also average. The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. There is a small proportion of minority ethnic pupils who speak English as an additional language.
3. **Denbigh Community Primary School** – an 'outstanding' larger than average-sized primary school. The proportion of pupils supported by pupil premium is much larger than average and makes up almost half the pupils in the school. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is above average. Almost all pupils are white British and few are from other ethnic backgrounds.

The 4th school is yet to be decided, however a shortlist of 5 schools are being considered.

References

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Will you make any payment or remuneration to participants or their carers/consultees?

[ ] Yes [X] No

If yes: Please provide details/justifications. Note that your Faculty may have specific guidelines on participant payments/payment rates etc and you should consult these where appropriate:

Civ. RESEARCH TEAM – DBS CLEARANCE

If you, or any members of the research team, will have regular contact on an individual basis with children or vulnerable adults as part of this research study, the relevant DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) clearance may have to be obtained in advance. Check at the DBS website https://www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview and then complete the sections below

Will you, or any member of your research team, require DBS clearance?

[X] Yes [ ] No

If yes: Provide details of the DBS clearance that has been obtained

Name	**Type of DBS clearance (State: standard, enhanced, enhanced with lists)**	**Reference**	**Date of DBS check**
The researcher has enhanced DBS clearance for 2 existing roles – School Governor and Supply Teacher. The researcher will apply through the DBS Update Service for clearance to work at individual schools.			
Most recent DBS **Position Applied for: Governor – Child Workforce** **Type of DBS: Enhanced** **Certificate Number: 001511440431** **Date of Issue: 30th November 2015**			

D. CONSENT

Please indicate the type of consent that will be used in this study:

[X] **Informed consent**

Please include copies of information sheets and consent forms in the 'Supporting Documentary Evidence'. If you are using alternative formats to provide information and /or record consent (e.g. images, or audio recording), provide brief details and outline the justification for this approach and the uses to which it will be put:

INFORMED 'OPT IN' CONSENT

For this project, informed consent, which is central to the ethical control of all social research (Homan, 2001; Dockett et al, 2012), will be sought from the 'gatekeepers' - that is the person or people providing or withholding access to the children involved (Lewis, 2002), in this case the parents/guardians of the children. An informed consent model of 'opt in' will be adopted; the parents will have to return a reply slip (see supporting document) and actively agree to their child's participation (Farrimond, 2013). Included in this form will be a requirement for the parent to indicate whether they are happy for their child to be video recorded. Voice recording will be offered as an alternative method (please see section B for further information). As part of this process, it is the researcher's obligation to make sure the parents understand the research project, including how and to whom the findings will be shared (BERA, 2011). Please see the 'Parent Information Sheet' for further details. Formal, written consent also needs to have been granted by the individual head teachers of the 4 schools and the Reception staff directly involved in the study, before any contact with parents is made.

In line with Article 12 of the United Nations on the Rights of the Child, children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express them freely and should also be facilitated to give fully informed consent (BERA, 2011). The process of gaining children's agreement in this way is often referred to by researchers as 'assent' (Dockett et al, 2012; Alderson, 2000). In this project, the children will be asked for their assent at the start of each activity, in an informal verbal manner. The researcher wishes to avoid a formal recording of assent in case the children's decision to partake appears unchangeable (Dockett et al, 2012). For children to be able to give assent, it is important that children comprehend the purpose and content of the research activity, have time to assimilate the information and know that they can withdraw from the activity at any time (Einarsdottir, 2007; Dockett et al, 2012; Cocks, 2006). It is for this reason that the researcher aims to introduce herself before any group activities take place, with the aim of opening up a collaborative account of the research project and consent process (Danby and Farrell, 2005). An introduction of this nature can also stimulate early, useful conversations about the study, and allow the children to share in the researcher's thinking (Cocks, 2006).

INTRODUCTION OF THE RESEARCH

During the initial introduction the following ideas will be addressed:

- *That the researcher is a 'learner', and that children are the experts about their school.*
  - That research is about 'searching' for an answer and the children might be able to help me find the answer.
- *That the research is a little like a 'school project' where work undertaken is shared among children, adults and teachers.*
- *That the researcher is trying to find the answer to these questions: Do Reception children feel ready to go to Year 1. How can teachers help children get ready?*

Before any research activities take place the researcher would like to spend one month across the three schools to become familiar with individual school contexts, school adults and more importantly the children. This also gives children plenty of time to reflect upon the nature of the project and consider their participation. During this time children will be given time to handle the visual and voice recording equipment and ask questions. Flewitt (2005) found this is a useful part of the consent process, particularly as the children asked many relevant questions about the nature of the recording and who was to view the video.

CHILDREN'S ASSENT

An 'assent conversation' with groups of children at the start of each activity will take place and follow a pattern similar to that advised by Farrimond (2013).

1. *Hi, my name is Laura and I am trying to learn more about what you all think of school and moving up to Year 1.*
2. The researcher will state what the task will involve and explain that the video camera (or voice recorder) is there to record what the children are saying.
3. The researcher will then ask for their participation – *Do you want to continue? Is that okay?*
4. The researcher will also clarify how the children can indicate their wish to withdraw from the activity. If children do decide to withdraw then the appropriate course of action is for the researcher to accept this decision without question (BERA, 2011; Dockett *et al*., 2012). It is important that the children know that withdrawing from the research will not be held against them (Alderson, 1995). The researcher is also aware that children can indicate their dissent in lots of different ways (verbally, behaviorally, emotionally) (Dockett *et al*., 2012) and it will be important to look out for non-verbal signs.
5. The children will be told that they can ask questions at any time.

A great deal of the project's ethical integrity rests on the researcher's own personal skills and judgment (Christensen and Prout, 2002) and ability to operate reflexively (Cocks, 2006) during the assent process. The researcher considers that her previous experience working with children will be of significant value throughout this part of the project.

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☐ **Informed consent in line with sections 30-33 of the Mental Capacity Act**

If the study involves participants who lack capacity to consent, procedures in line with sections 30-33 of the Mental Capacity Act will need to be put in place. Please outline the intended process for seeking consent and include copies of information and consent forms in the 'Supporting Documentary Evidence'. If you are using alternative formats to provide information and /or record consent (e.g. video or audio recording), provide brief details:

☐ **If using an alternative consent model (e.g. for ethnographic research)**

Provide a rationale that explains why informed consent is not appropriate for this research study and detail the alternative consent arrangements that will be put in place. Add any relevant supporting documentation to the 'Supporting Documentary Evidence' section.

E. RISK

Please refer to any Risk Assessments (RA) you have consulted to ensure the safety of the research team and your participants. Please state the level of risk for each RA. If none have been consulted please explain how any potential risks will be managed.

The following documents have been read and are attached to this application:

- EXTERNAL_01 Research conducted external to the University
- Faculty HLS Policy on Research Involving Children & Vulnerable adults

The researcher has also written an additional Risk Assessment specific to this project.

F. TASKS AND ACTIVITIES FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I. Provide a detailed description of what the participants will be asked to do for the research study, including details about the process of data collection (e.g. completing how many interviews / assessments, when, for how long, with whom). Add any relevant documentation to the 'Supporting Documentary Evidence' section of this form.

STUDY 1 TASKS

The children will only be asked to complete 1 of the described tasks. It is proposed that these activities last between 10-20 minutes and will be in the classroom or in a familiar space in the school; a decision that will be made with the head teacher and practitioners in each of the schools.

Task 1: My Perfect Classroom (drawing)

What would be in your perfect classroom? What would the children be doing? What will they learn? What would the teacher be doing? Can you draw it? As the children draw, the researcher will listen to their conversations and note down children's comments, facilitating the conversation with further, open questions as appropriate. This activity is designed to be broad enough for various themes to emerge, perhaps relating to the children's general perceptions about the purposes of education, and also about their early years experiences to date.

Task 2: An 'Unhappy' Classroom (drawing)

Carried out in a similar way to task 1. In the 'perfect' classroom activity, there is a chance that the children might second-guess what the researcher would like them to draw; this alternative task is considered less susceptible to this kind of issue. Given the slightly more sensitive nature of the activity, this task will be carried out at Southridge First School where the researcher knows the children well.

Task 3: Persona Dolls (talking)

The children will be introduced to 2 puppets (persona dolls). The researcher will have carefully mapped out personas for these two characters before the task takes place. The researcher will explain that the puppets have been talking about going to Year 1 and thinking about their feelings and how 'ready' they are. Rather than the children talk about their own feelings of 'readiness', they'll be asked to consider the puppets' feelings. Pictures of the individual school's Year 1 classrooms will be used as prompt, as well as 3 pictures of traffic lights, showing green, amber and red. Traffic lights are commonly used in schools as an 'assessment for

learning' strategy (Black *et al*., 2004; Florez and Sammons, 2013). In this instance, the traffic light colours could indicate different levels of 'readiness'.

Task 4: Pictures Prompts (talking)

These picture prompts will be of school contexts the researcher would like children to analyse. These will include contrasting images of children working in Reception, and Year 1 classroom settings.

Additional Tasks

There is likely to be a further 2 different focus group tasks for the children to take part in. These will be developed in response to the outcomes of the pilot study and children's ideas. It may be that some of the focus group activities generate similar kinds of data. Subsequent tasks may be designed to explore new topics or look for information that will challenge understanding. One of the tasks for example, may explore – *what does a good learner look like?*

Questions asked by the researcher during all of these activities will be broad and not always relating to participants' personal experiences but to children's experiences in general e.g. *What helps children be ready for Year 1? How can teachers help children be ready for Year 1?*

References

Black, P., Harrison, C. and Lee, C. (2004) *Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom*. Granada Learning.

Florez, M. T. and Sammons, P. (2013). *Assessment for learning: effects and impact.* Berkshire: CfBT Education Trust.

II. Provide full details of all materials that will be used (including consent documentation). If you are using newly developed or unpublished materials these must be provided as Supporting Documentary Evidence

III. If the task could cause any discomfort or distress to participants (physical, psychological or emotional) describe the measures that will be put in place to reduce any distress or discomfort. Please give details of the support that will be available for any participants who become distressed during their involvement with the study.

CHILDREN MOVING ON

The project will explore the idea of children getting ready for Year 1. This is perhaps something the children might not previously have considered depending on transition practices in individual schools. Though unlikely, this topic of conversation could generate some feelings of apprehension. The researcher will discuss the process of transition with class teachers. The researcher is a trained teacher and will be sensitive to the children's responses. Also, children do not have to speak in the activities if they don't want to. Using puppets and broad, open questions should afford children opportunities to talk about the 'readiness' of others rather than themselves. Encouraging children to be open about their thoughts and feelings might help children make sense of their transition to Year 1. In addition to these control measures, the researcher will familiarize herself with all relevant policies in each of the schools and follow recommended safeguarding procedures. The researcher passed a 'Safeguarding in Education' course in January 2016 (certificate attached).

CHILDREN'S SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND WELLBEING

Some of the activities will encourage children to be more personally reflective about their own 'readiness' and perhaps about their own abilities. The researcher will be sensitive to children who lack confidence or display insecurities. The researcher is likely to have identified these children already, during her month in school. Teacher assessment data will also reveal children who possibly lack confidence in the prime areas of the early years curriculum. This is also why a multi-method approach has been designed; to afford children of different strengths and abilities opportunities to participate, in an activity best suited to them. As mentioned, the researcher will work very closely with the class teacher to make all activities a useful aspect of children's transition.

2. HUMAN TISSUE

If your research study uses human tissue, all of the questions in this section must be completed.

A. SAMPLES

Provide details of the type of human tissue samples (e.g. blood, oral fluids, urine, saliva) and the number of samples the research study will collect and/or examine.

Will this research study use samples that have been collected by another organisation or institution?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes: Where applicable (e.g. commercially available cell lines) provide details of the supplier (company or institution name, address and telephone number). Appropriate letters

of permission should be included as supplementary evidence. Describe any measures that will be put in place to meet the supplier's terms and conditions. (Note: arrangements about anonymising data, data storage and security should be provided in section 6). N.B. Primary cell lines and stem cells require consent documentation and compliance with HTA regulations.

Describe how the sample will be taken or collected and provide the names and university/company affiliation of the researchers or technicians involved in taking or collecting samples. If your study involves blood samples, name the trained phlebotomist who will be taking the blood samples.

Provide a schedule that shows the type of sample(s) (e.g. blood, oral fluids, urine, saliva) and the number of samples that will be taken from participants over your chosen period of time.

If the task could cause discomfort or distress to participants (physical, psychological or emotional) describe the measures that will be put in place to reduce any distress or discomfort.

Explain how the samples will be disposed of, or transferred to another facility after your research has ended.

3. ANIMAL SUBJECTS

If your research study uses animal subjects or biological material from animals, all of the questions in this section must be completed. If the study has the potential to cause distress or harm to animals, you must consider the 3 Rs (replacement, refinement and reduction) and apply these principles to the study.

A. Sample

Describe how animals, or biological material from animals, will be used in this study. Your description should include: the species; the number of animals or the number of samples that will be used in the study; and if the study will take place in the natural environment or in research premises.

B. Source of sample

Provide the contact details (company or organisation name, address and telephone number) of the supplier who is providing the animals or animal tissue. If it is a commercial supplier, include a copy of the letter or email confirming the supplier's Schedule One status under 'Supporting Documentary Evidence'. If the supplier is a University, include a letter or email

confirming that the animal was culled under Schedule One conditions under 'Supporting Documentary Evidence'.

C. Licenses

Does your work require licensing under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes: Provide details of the licences that you currently hold or will be applying for:

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4. DATA FROM SECONDARY SOURCES

If your research will be using data from secondary sources (i.e. data about people that has not been gathered by you from the research sample and which is not in the public domain) then the following sections must be completed.

A. DATA SOURCE

What is the source of your data?

TEACHER ASSESSMENT DATA

With permission, the researcher would like use to individual school's early years teacher assessment data. Please see section Ci for more information.

Describe any measures that will be put in place to meet the supplier's terms and conditions. (Note: arrangements about anonymising data, data storage and security should be provided in section 6). Where permissions are required to access data, provide evidence of the relevant permissions you have obtained in the supporting documentary evidence.

If your research involves the cooperation of external organizations then relevant permission should be provided in the 'Supporting Evidence Section'.

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5. ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

If your research study involves taking samples from the urban or natural environment (e.g. (soil, water, vegetation, invertebrates, geological samples etc) all of the questions in this section must be completed.

A. SITE INFORMATION

List the locations where the data collection will take place including, where appropriate, the map reference. State if the location is protected by legislation (e.g. Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), National Park etc).

B. PERMISSION AND ACCESS

Do you need permission to include the location(s) in the research study or to gain access to the site(s)?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes: State the job title and contact details (address and telephone number) of the person you will contact to request permission. If you have already received permission, please include a copy of the letter or email confirming access under 'Supporting Documentary Evidence'.

C. SAMPLES

Provide details of: the type of sample(s) you will collect (soil, water, vegetation, invertebrates etc); the size of each sample; and the spread of sampling across the location(s). Explain how the samples will be disposed of after the research is complete

Briefly explain why collecting the sample(s) is essential to the research study.

D. COLLECTION

Describe how you will reach the site and any potential pollution, noise, erosion or damage that could occur. Detail the measures you will take to reduce any impacts.

Detail any impacts caused by extracting the sample (e.g. disturbance of animal or bird populations; use and disposal of chemicals in the field; trampling or removal of vegetation; visual or aesthetic impacts caused by markers left on the site). Detail the measures you will take to reduce any impacts.

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6. Data security and storage

A. **ANONYMISING DATA**

Describe the arrangements for anonymising data and if not appropriate explain why this is and how it is covered in the informed consent obtained.

Participants will be allocated a unique alpha-numeric ID code. All data will be

labelled only with the participant ID code. The personal data will not be held in any format that would allow anyone to trace information back to the participant. Only the named people involved in the study will have access to this information. In the event of communicating the data in the public domain, children will be assigned pseudonym's to protect their anonymity. The identity of the schools in which the research takes place will also be kept anonymous in any public communication of data.

B. STORAGE

Describe the arrangements for the secure transport and storage of data collected and used during the study. This should include reference to 'clouds', USB sticks.

Any documents containing participant information (names etc) will be kept separate from coded data and will be stored in a lockable file accessible only by the researcher. All electronic data will be coded and stored on a password-protected computer. All information and data gathered during this research will be stored in line with the Data Protection Act.

C. RETENTION AND DISPOSAL

Describe the arrangements for the secure retention and disposal of data when the research study is complete.

All information and data gathered during this research will be kept until three years after the final publication when it will be destroyed. During that time the data may be used by members of the research team only for purposes appropriate to the research question, but at no point will personal information or data be revealed.

7. Intellectual property

Please provide details of any Intellectual Property issues or commercial implications arising from the proposed study. Please describe the agreements that are in place to protect / exploit the Intellectual Property.

8. Timescale

Proposed start date of data collection: 01/06/2016

Proposed end date of data collection: JULY 2017

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9. Supplementary information

Please tick the boxes that relate to the supplementary documentation that you will attach as part of your submission:

[X] Participant information sheet

[X] Consent form(s)

[X] Debrief sheet

[ ] Participant recruitment email/poster

[ ] Unpublished (in-house) questionnaire(s)

[ ] Interview / observation / focus group schedules

[X] Risk Assessments / Standard Operating procedures

[ ] Permission letters (e.g. from school, organization, team etc)

[X] Other documents. Please specify below:

- Invitation letter to schools
- 'Safeguarding in Education' certificate

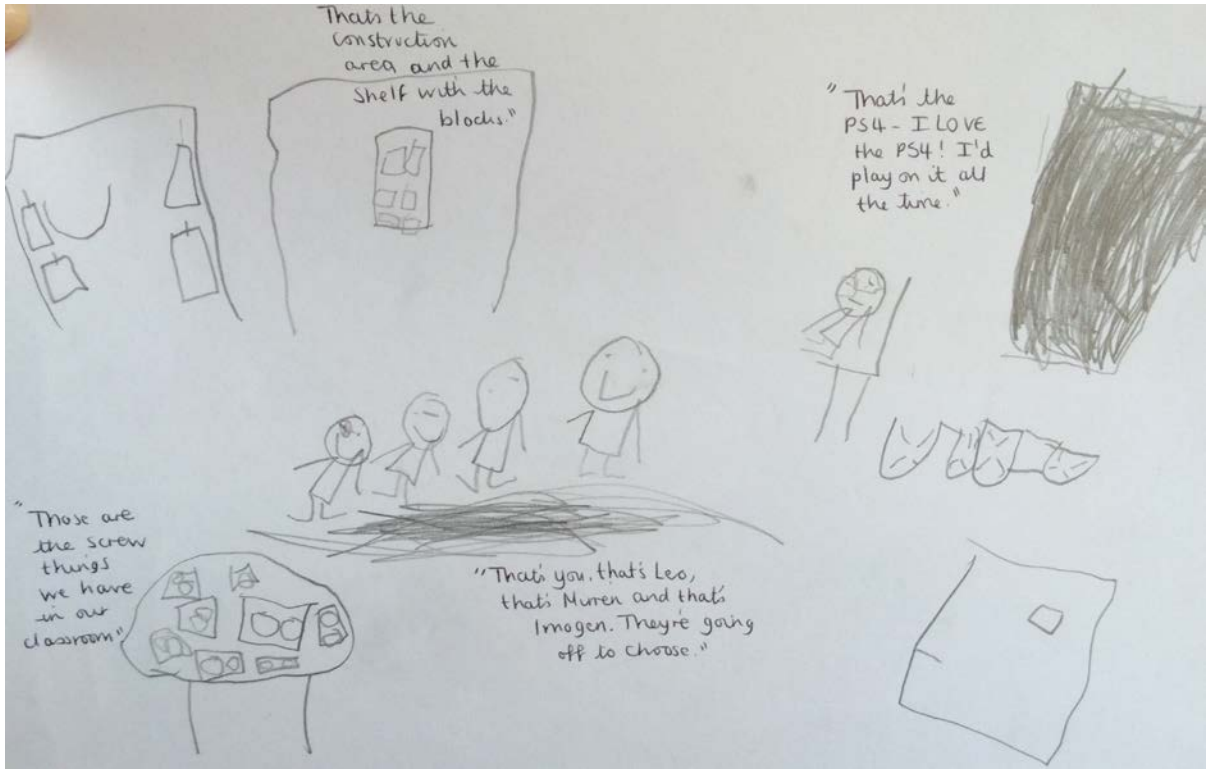
LH: *What is a classroom?*
Oscar: *It's a place where you learn things and do playing.*
LH: *It's a place where you learn things and do playing.*
Oscar: *And you write stuff.*

Oscar: *Look what I drawed! That's the construction area.*
LH: *You've got a construction area in your classroom?*
Oscar: *And that's the cupboard where the bricks are.*

Oscar: *Okay, this is going to be, um, the building area but with, um...with boats and things that you, screws that you can screw on.*

LH: (...) *if I could grant you one wish, what would you wish for there to be?*
Oscar: *Computers and PS4s (...) I love PS4 and there's going to be some games you can play.*

Oscar: *Hm, well I need a chair (...) This is the teacher.*
(...)
LH: *Who is this teacher?*
Oscar: *ME!*
LH: *That's you? You're the teacher in your classroom?*
Oscar: *Yeah, and I'm guna, and I'm going to draw p-, the children sitting on the carpet.*
(...)
LH: *Okay. Why would you have children in your perfect classroom?*
Oscar: *Because you couldn't be able to teach anyone.*



LH: *Oscar, what are you drawing at the minute?*
Oscar: *The telly where you can play the PS4 (...) finally I'm done drawing the telly.*
LH: *What are you drawing next then?*
Oscar: *The remote.*

Oscar: *This is going to be the um, the space area.*
LH: *Ooo a space area! Why are you having a space area?*
Oscar: *Cos there IS a space area in my class.*
LH: *There is. You're absolutely right.*

Ida: *That's the way out of the classroom.*
LH: *Is it? There's a door?*
Oscar: *I never knew you were drawing a door. I don't really want to, cos I like it in my classroom.*

LH: *(...) Oscar, why would this classroom make you happy?*
Oscar: *Because there's loads of games and we just, shall I tell you why w-, why I made you standing up?*
LH: *Why?*
Oscar: *Because yuh just going off to choose.*
(...)
LH: *And what would be the first thing you would go and choose?*
Oscar: *It would be the PS4 (...) because I love playing on the PS4 AND the construction area and space area and that.*

May: *This is going to be the whiteboard.*
Oscar: *We do have a whiteboard, but I don't want to draw it.*

Child: *I'm going to draw Shopkins in mine. Do you know…they actually do jumbo Shopkins you know.* (…) I have Shopkins at my house.

Child: *This is Sadie Soccerball… she's from Season 5. That one, she is, these two are from Season 1 and that's from Season 4.*

Child: *That is em, that is Berry Smoothie.*

LH: *Aaaah. So at the minute Lola, what have you got in your classroom?*

Child: *Em, chalkboard and a door and Shopkins.*

LH: *Fantastic.*

Child: *I'm still drawing ma Shopkins.*

LH: *Aha! OK!*

Child: *Cos' I like Shopkins. Shopkins are my favourite.*

Child *I'm in the hundreds with my Shopkins.*

LH: *What are Shopkins then, I don't understand?*

Child *They're thing whi-, they're things in categories, that have faces.*

LH: *Are they characters? Can you hold them? Are they like dolls?*

Child *Yeah but they're smaller than Barbie Dolls.*

LH: *Ok, they're smaller than Barbie Dolls –*

Child *Only that small*
Makes a gesture with fingers to show how small?

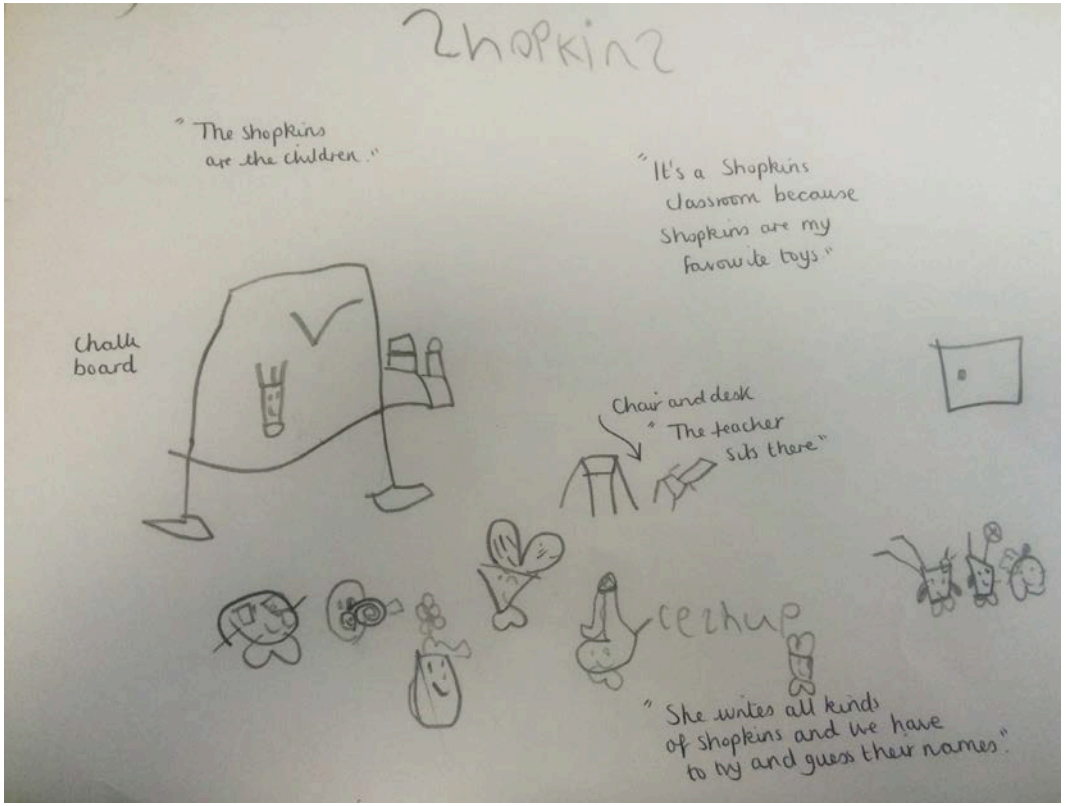
LH: *And do you collect them?*

Child *Yeah. My dad collects rock food.*

LH: *Does he?*

Child *Yeah he collects sticks of rock.*

Child: *Do you know, I'm actually going to draw Little Sipper (…) She's a little drink (…) She's cute.*



LH: *(…) Lola who would be in your classroom?*
Child: *Shopkins!*
LH: *Would there be any people?*
Child: *It's going to be a Shopkins classroom! (…) There's just all kinds of Shopkins.*
LH: *So there's no people in your classroom?*
Child: *No cos it's a Shopkins classroom!*
LH: *(…) why do you like Shopkins so much?*
Child: *Becus they're so small and cute (…)*

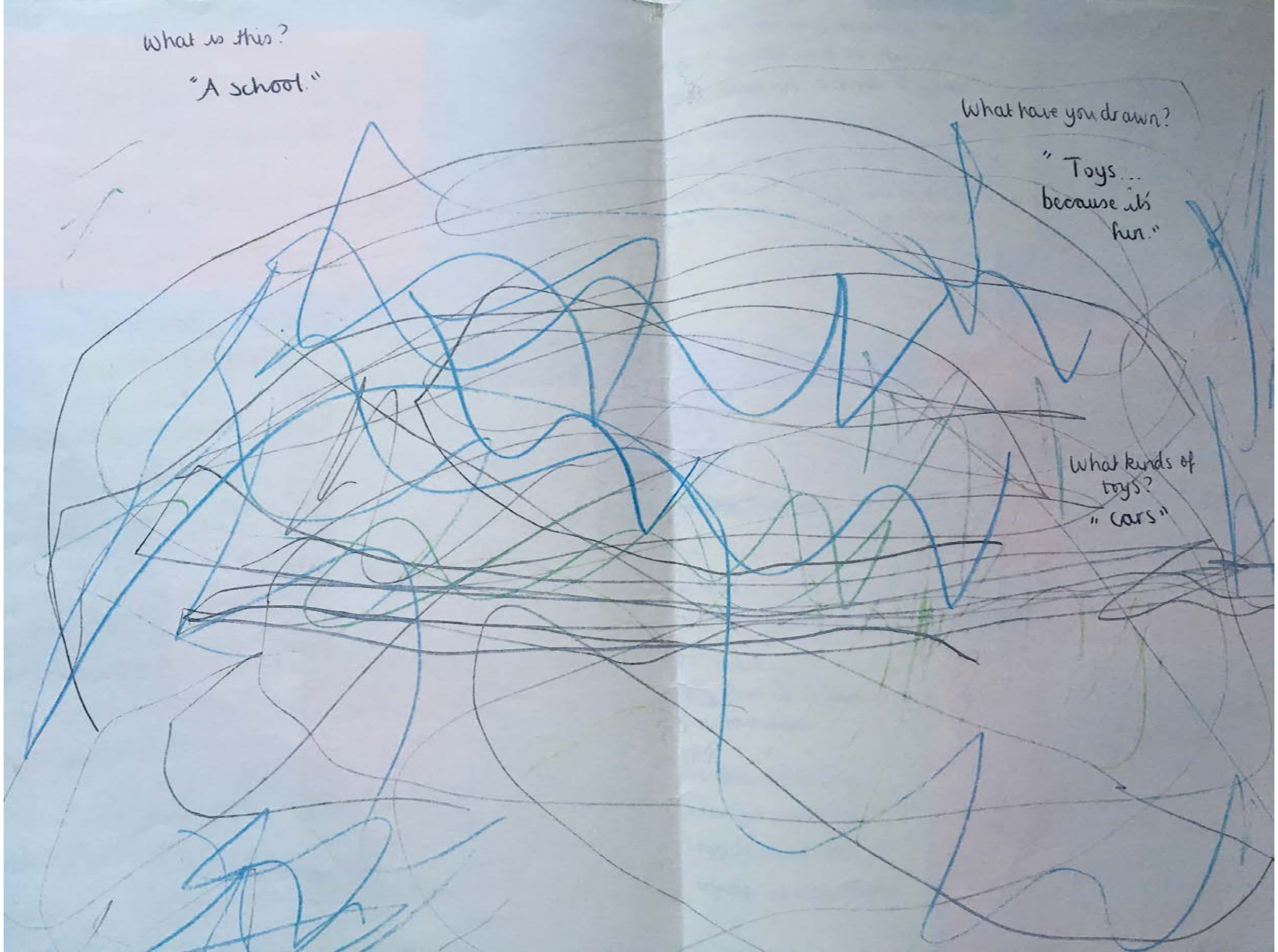
Child: *I'm guna do more Shopkins.*

LH: *Ok.*

Child: *Em, that's Apple Blossom.*

LH: *Who?*

Child: *Apple Blossom (…) I love Shopkins so I'm guna do 100 Shopkins.*


What is this?
"A school."
What have you drawn?
" Toys... because it's fun."
What kinds of toys?
" cars"

LH: *What is a classroom?*

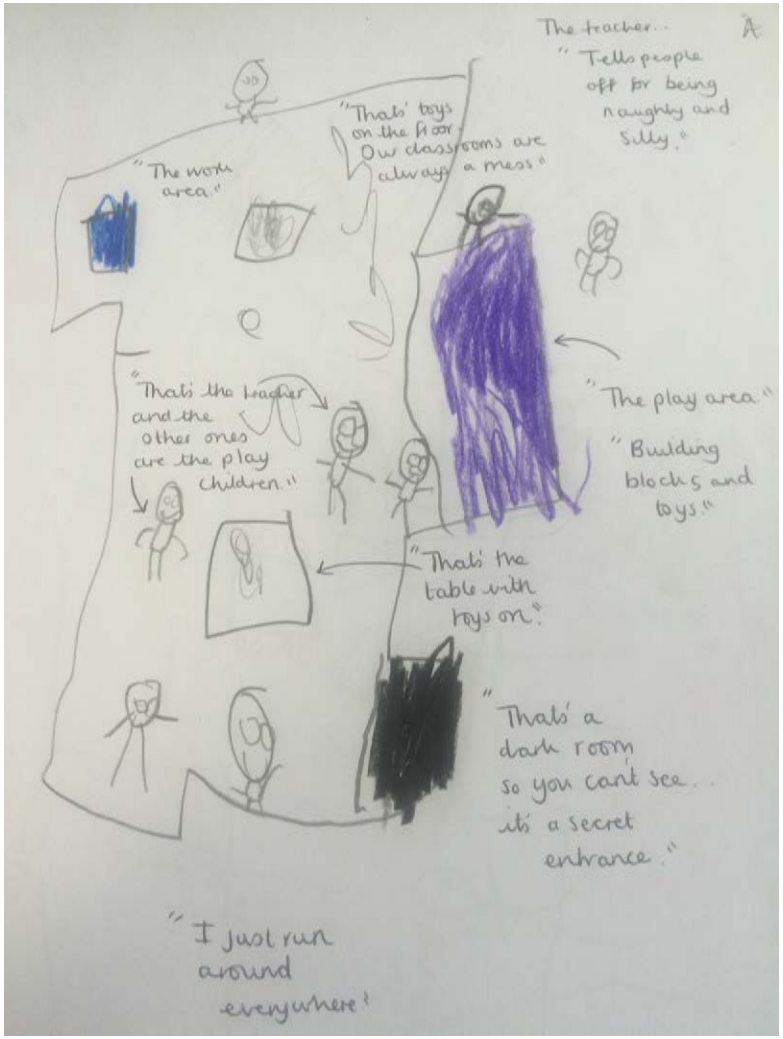
Child: *Em, it's a, it's a area where you can play and you sit on the carpet as well.*

Child *And learn!*

Child *I'm going to draw a table (…) I'm gunna draw, I'm gunna draw little toys on it.*

Child *Guess what, it always, it always gets messy so I need to put some toys on the floor cos it always gets messy in our classroom.*

Child *There's the teacher, there's the teacher wandering around (…) I'm drawing lots of kids.*



LH: *What's the purple for?*
Child *Em, that's the play area.*
LH: *Okay.*
Child *But that's the classroom area and that's the play area.*
LH: (…) *is the classroom area different to the play area?*
Child *Yeah! (…) Because there, because that's where you do all the work and that's where you do all the play.*
LH: *What kind of work are you doing?*
Child *Like, like, like drawing stuff (…) Like writing your name in Japanese.*
LH: *Write your name in Japanese? WOW!*
Child *Yeah, like that, cos that's so cool. Cos I know how to write my name in Japenese.*

LH: *Why would you be happy in this classroom?*

Child *Because, cos I love my friends?*

LH: *That's a lovely thing to say? Who is in your classroom?*

Child *Em like Zak and stuff.*

LH: *Are there any grown ups in your classroom?*

Child *Yeah, that's a grown up.*

LH: *And what are the grown ups doing*

Child *Um, they make sure that nobody bes naughty.*

LH: *What kinds of toys are in your classroom?*

Child *There's like lego and, AND there's girly stuff on the other ones.*

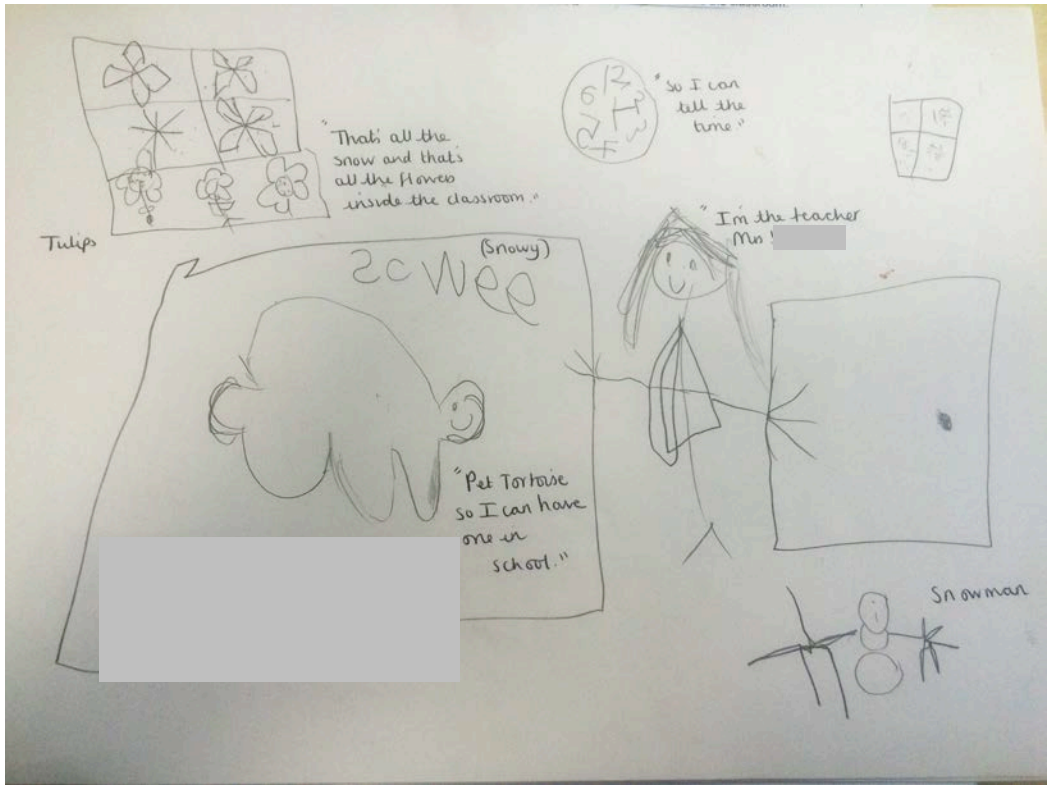
LH: *Okay.*

Child *Like, like dolls.*

Child: *It's a tortoise.*
LH: *A tortoise?*
Child: Nods head.
LH: *Tell me more about the tortoise.*
Child: *This the tortoise classroom in my classroom (…) It's the tortoise's classroom as well.*
LH: *Is this a real tortoise?*
Child: Nods head.
LH: *Why would you like a tortoise in your classroom?*
Child: *Just for a pet tortoise.*

Child: *This is all my classroom.*

Child: *Ah, I haven't drawn me!*



Child: *Now I have a name for it (…) Snowy! (…) This is where the tortoise can play out.*
LH: *I think I can guess, but why did you choose to call the tortoise Snowy?*
Child: *Cos it's a snow picture (…) And there's a snowman there, and there's me and there's the door to get out.*
LH: *(…) what will you be doing in this classroom?*
Child: *Em, helping the tortoise get out.*
LH: *Helping the tortoise get out?!*
Child: *I'm opening the door.*

Child: *This is the, this is the classroom and that's the door to get out.*
LH: *So in your classroom at the minute, you have…*
Child: *A window and flowers and snowflakes.*
LH: *Why have you put flowers in your classroom?*
Child: *Just to make it nice.*
LH: *What's this over here?*
Child: *This is the window part so everyone can see it snowing outside.*
LH: *What's this?*
Child: *This is the tortoise bit, so, so em… the tortoise has got a little room and I'm guna draw a box and then I'm guna write tortoise.*

LH: *Is there a teacher in your classroom?*
Child: *Me*
LH: *You're the teacher?*
Child: *Nods head.*
LH: *Why are you the teacher Penny?*
Child: *Because it's my classroom.*

LH: *What makes this the best classroom?*
Child: *Cos, cos it's got a big tortoise and it's a snowy day and all the children are playing outside.*
LH: *Why is it a snowy day?*
Child: *Because it's winter.*
LH: *Why did you want it to be winter?*
Child: Because it's Christmas.
LH: *Oh! Why have you chosen for it to be Christmas?*
Child: *Because I like Christmas.*
LH: *Do you? Why do you like Christmas?*
Child: *Because you get loads of presents of Santa.*

LH: *What is a classroom?*

Child: *(…) Yuh can make stuff and enjoy playing with your friends.*

LH: *If I gave you a wish and I said xxxx, you can have anything in your classroom you want, what would you wish for?*

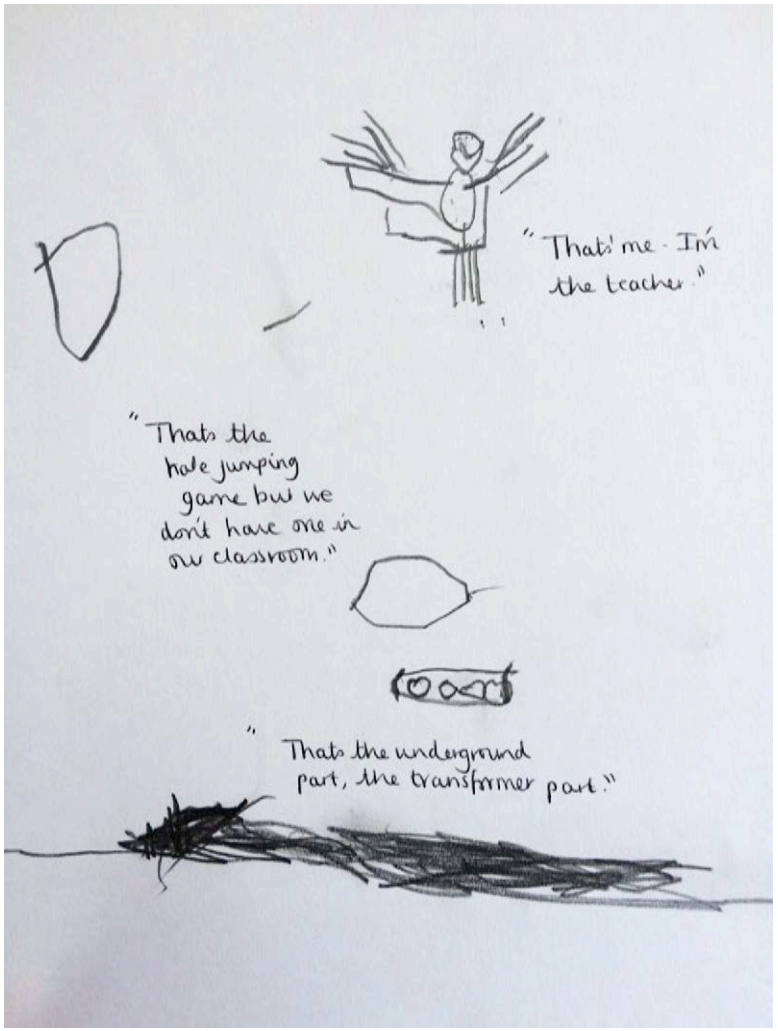
Child: *Erm…I would wish to…play with my friends and play nicely.*

LH: (…) *xxxx, what are you playing in your classroom?*

Child: *Er.. I'm playing a game that you have to like..um, try and jump over the other hole, and then jump over to the other hole.*

(…)

Child: *I haven't actually got it in my classroom, but I wish I had.*



Child 2: *I couldn't draw thirty people cos I'm going to teach you, you, you and you.*

Child: *No, not me (…) Cos' I'm not, I'm the teacher in mine.*

Child: *I've actually played underground*

LH: *You've played underground before?*

Leon nods head.

LH: *How? Tell me how?*

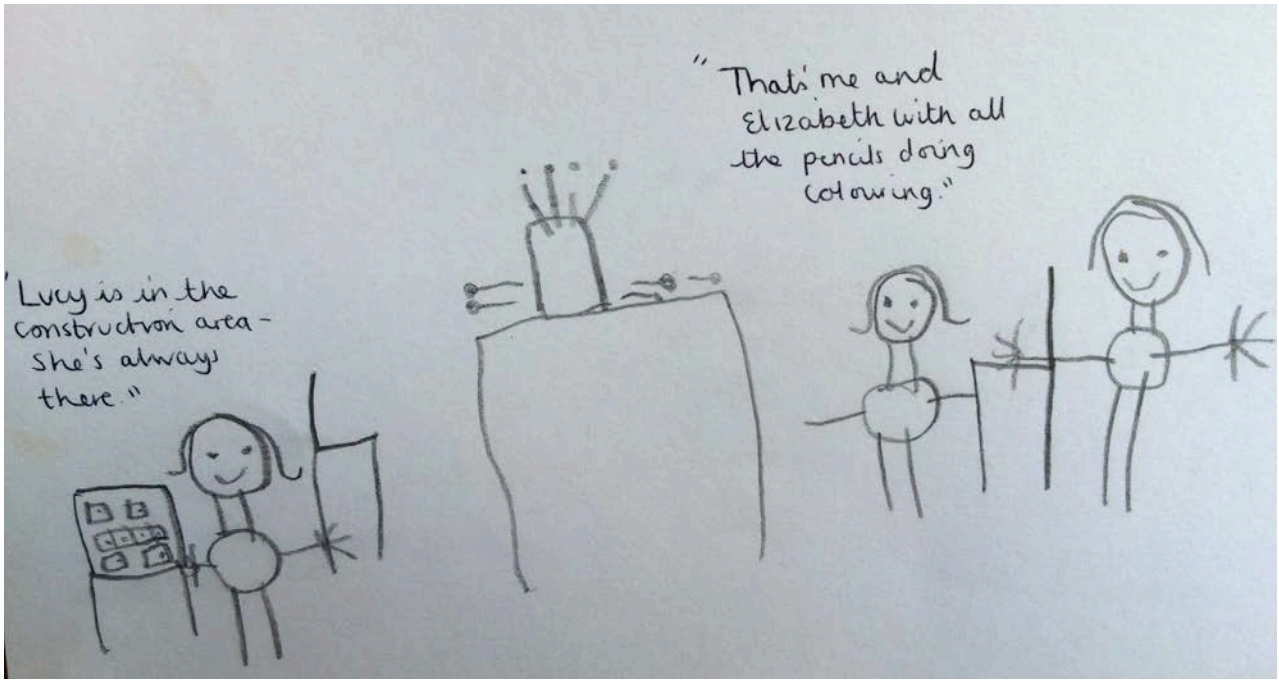
Child: *'cos of all like toys that I've ever seem underground, like the new transformer things.*

LH: *If I could grant you a magical wish what would you wish for?*

Child: *(…) I wish for a table with lots of pencils.*

LH: *What is a classroom?*

Child: *(…) you enjoy your teachers.*



Child: *Ooo – something new?! What's this?*

Child: *This is the construction area and those are cupboards with all the bricks.*

Child: *I'm doing choosing and I'm just getting off the chair.*

LH: *Ida, why would you this classroom make you happy?*

Child: *Cos I love drawing… and I love playing in the construction.*

LH: *What are you drawing xxxx?*

Child: *Lots and lots of pencils. (…) The children in my classroom love drawing.*

This one feels like a story.

Totally random! Two references to snow and it summer?

Nowhere does it mention anything about anyone else.

The Tortoise Classroom

Big tortoise, snowy day
All the children are playing outside
A window, and flowers, and four snowflakes
This is all my classroom (and the tortoise's)
I'll be helping the tortoise get out
I like Christmas
You get loads of presents off Santa
I love my mum, really much

It's less about school and more about external things, things in the future, things at home.

She's absolutely setting him free!

I'm guessing this is a Frozen reference?